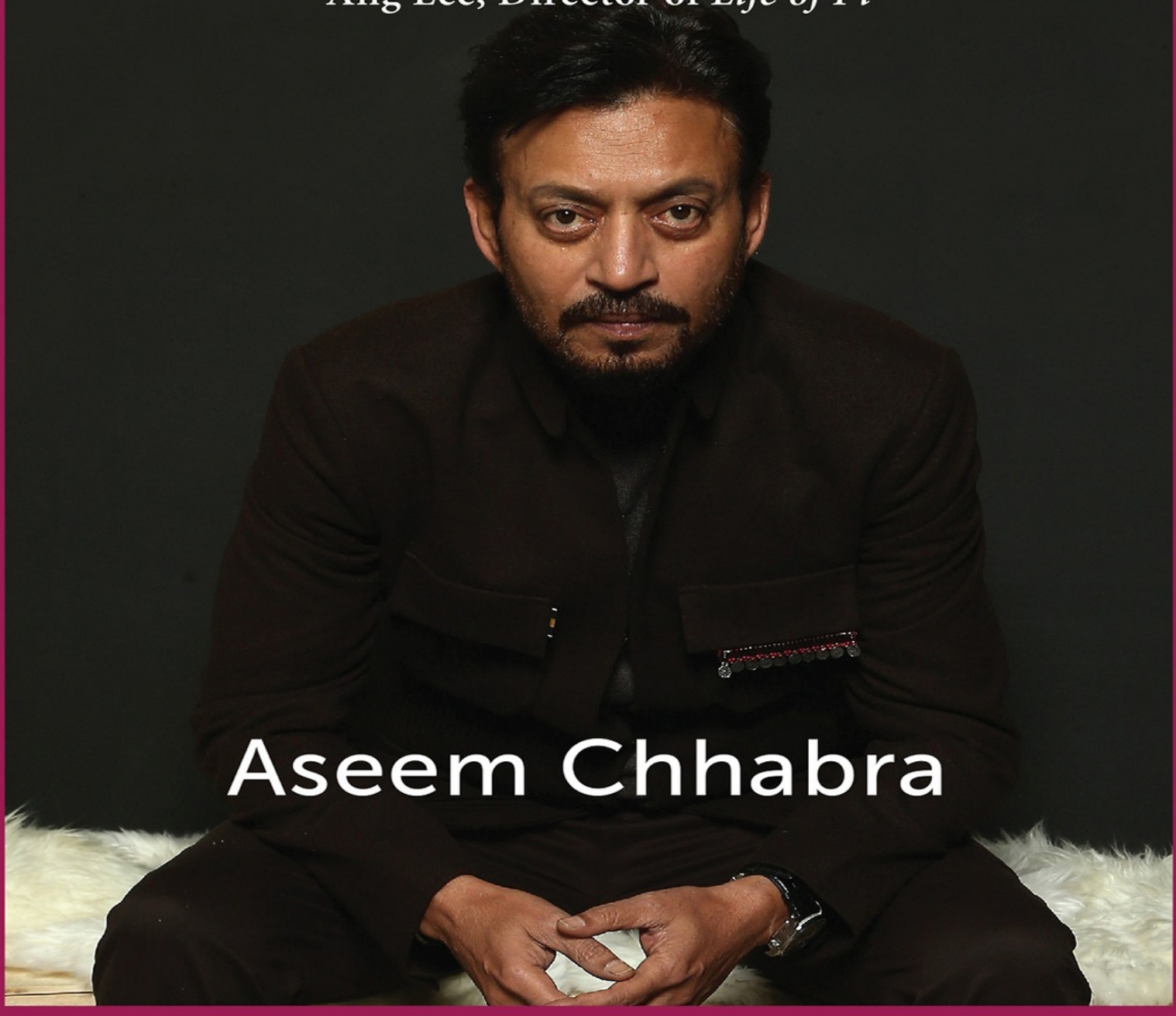
IRRFAN KHAN

The Man, The Dreamer, The Star

An accomplished actor, one of the biggest stars.
—Ang Lee, Director of *Life of Pi*



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RUPA

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To Nikhil Lakshman,
friend and mentor who took me to see Irrfan Khan in Maqbool

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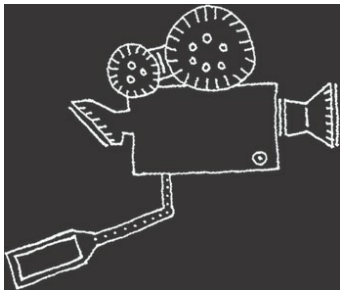
ROOHDAAR—BOLLYWOOD'S CONJURER

AN INTRODUCTION



Ek aisa kalakaar jiski aankhein afsaane kehti hain.[1]

In the fall of 2006, I was walking to my local subway station in Sunnyside, a middle-class neighbourhood in Queens, New York. It was early morning and I was running late for work. Suddenly, my cell phone rang and I stopped on the sidewalk. The call was from India.

'Hello, is that Aseem Chhabra?' I heard from the other end.

'Yes,' I said.

'*Sir, main Irrfan Khan bol rahan hoon, Mumbai se* (Sir, I am Irrfan Khan calling from Mumbai.).'

My heart skipped a beat. *Was it really Irrfan Khan?* I wondered, excited like a schoolboy. It sure sounded like him.

Yes, *Irrfan Khan* had called me.

Earlier, in September 2006, I had seen Irrfan in Mira Nair's *The Namesake* at the Telluride Film Festival, held in an exclusive ski town in south-west Colorado. Immediately after, I had written a long profile of the filmmaker for *Mirror Buzz*, a Sunday magazine that *Mumbai Mirror* used to publish. Naturally, the news peg was the world premiere of *The Namesake*. Irrfan had read my story, somehow gotten my number and called me in New York.

'*Kaisi hai film* (How is the film)?' I heard Irrfan ask. '*Maine dekhi nahi abhi* (I have not seen it yet).'

What had seemed like a regular morning suddenly seemed to be filled with promise.

I responded, '*Irrfan Saab, kamaal ki film hai* (It is an extraordinary film, Irrfan Saab). Your performance is heartbreaking. You made me cry.'

And I meant every word. Jhumpa Lahiri's honest, strong writing, as interpreted by Mira Nair, had created the moving, raw, gentle story of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguly. It had made a deep impact on me. As a first generation immigrant in the United States, I could relate to their struggles, their hopes, aspirations and disappointments. My path and story of immigration was somewhat different, but the heartfelt performances of Irrfan

and Tabu spoke to me. I still cry watching Irrfan's Ashoke desperately trying to connect with his son Gogol (Kal Penn), failing to do so and then accepting his life, the way it had shaped out for him, as his fate. *The Namesake* made me proud and comfortable. Finally someone understood my life.

I knew it then. The actor was a rare shining star who could light up the screen with his quiet yet towering presence—Irrfan Khan, Bollywood's Roohdaar[2]. Its Ashoke[3], Maqbool and Rana[4].

Ek aisa kalakaar jiski aankhein afsaane kehti hain. (An actor whose eyes narrate a sea of stories.)

It was only while researching for this book that I realized that the first time I had seen Irrfan on the silver screen was in Govind Nihalani's 1990 film *Drishti* (I watched a pirated Video Home System tape of the film in New York). In the film, Irrfan plays the supporting role of a young musician who has a brief affair with a married woman, played by Dimple Kapadia.

A graduate of Delhi's National School of Drama (NSD), Irrfan dreamt of a film acting career like that of Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri. Both the actors graduated from NSD in 1973 and were 14 years senior to Irrfan. Upon graduating from NSD, Irrfan got a lot of acting work, but it was almost entirely in television, and he remained professionally dissatisfied. As I was living in the US during that decade, I missed most of Irrfan's television work. In fact, I had forgotten his supporting role of a prosecutor in Vikram Bhatt's sappy melodrama, *Kasoor* (2001).

It was *Haasil* (2003) that landed him the plum role (more on this later) in *Maqbool* (2003), Vishal Bhardwaj's brilliant adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. It was a powerful performance of a troubled Macbeth (or Maqbool, as renamed by screenwriters Vishal Bhardwaj and Abbas Tyrewala) working for an underworld leader in Bombay and in love with his boss's seductive mistress, Nimmi.

There was no social media in the early 2000s, yet, even though living in New York, I was becoming familiar with Irrfan's work. He showed glimpses of a rare shining star who could light up the screen, no matter what role he was playing.

In July 2005, I saw Irrfan in what was actually his first lead role—British-Indian filmmaker Asif Kapadia's *The Warrior* (2001). Although Irrfan gave a haunting performance in the film, *The Warrior* was mostly remembered for the 29-year-old Asif's visionary screenplay and direction. The film won two BAFTAs and also found admirers in the British film industry, including the late filmmaker Anthony Minghella, who stepped in to present the film. Miramax, the US-based indie distribution company, bought the rights to bring the film to theatres in the US.

However, *The Warrior* sat in Miramax's catalogue for a while. The production and distribution company's chief principals—brothers Harvey and Bob Weinstein—did not know how to release a Hindi-language film in the US until the summer of 2005, when they dumped the English-subtitled film in a few theatres before their unceremonious departure from the once-hugely-successful company. Irrfan was not flown to the US to promote the film or attend its premiere. *The Warrior* died at the box office, and nobody talked much about Irrfan Khan at the time.

In 2005, Irrfan also appeared in a wacky comedy—Aditya Bhattacharya's unreleased film, *Dubai Return*, which also never reached the audience in India. I watched it in New York, and a few years later I saw him in another delightful film—*Life in a… Metro* (2007), an ensemble piece directed by Anurag Basu, with a great comic track between Irrfan and Konkona Sen Sharma.

I first met Irrfan in the summer of 2007 when he came to New York on a junket to promote Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart*, based on the memoir of Mariane Pearl, widow of *The Wall Street Journal* reporter, Daniel Pearl. As I later wrote in my weekly *Mumbai Mirror* column, with the release of *A Mighty Heart*, 'Irrfan Khan became the first actor from India to have two films playing in the US at the same time. His Mira Nair vehicle, *The Namesake*, is on its last leg—still showing in theatres, and has earned over

$13 million. And now Khan is in a key supporting role in *A Mighty Heart* (which is) playing on 1,355 screens across (the US).'

At the junket there was a crazy rush of journalists wanting to interview Angelina Jolie, who played Mariane Pearl in the film. Some of the journalists did recognize Irrfan, since they had only recently seen him in *The Namesake*. Seated at the round table in New York City's Waldorf Astoria Hotel, I asked Irrfan how he felt about being recognized by reporters who otherwise would have only been interested in celebrities such as Angelina Jolie.

Irrfan hesitated for a moment and then, with a smile, he promptly said, 'I think I need more films. I wish I could get more films like this and people would take notice of me, until everybody knows me.' The other reporters started to laugh along with Irrfan, given his frank response that depicted his humility.

At the end of the interview, where I was the only journalist of Indian origin, Irrfan and I had a brief conversation. Suddenly, he asked me in Hindi, '*Kuch ho raha hai yahan* (Is something happening here)?' What he meant was, if anyone was actually noticing him in the US and whether he had a chance of getting more work.

'*Yes, definitely kuch to ho raha hai* (Yes, definitely something is happening),' I responded. 'It's not every day that an actor—even a Hollywood actor—has two films running in New York City.'

Irrfan seemed somewhat comforted by my statement, but the actor in him, who always wanted more in life, was still very curious about how to truly break Hollywood's glass ceiling.

That opportunity finally came a year later. In early September 2008, I attended the world premiere of Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* at the Telluride Film Festival. The film was a huge success with the audience. I had a sense that this film could be a winner. And then, two weeks later, it won the prestigious audience award at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF).

In February 2009, *Slumdog Millionaire* swept the Oscars. When the Academy Award for Best Picture was announced, the film's producer Christian Colson accepted the award. Irrfan was on the stage with his co-stars —Anil Kapoor, Freida Pinto, Dev Patel, the kids from the film, and other collaborators, A.R. Rahman, Resul Pookutty and the director Danny Boyle. If you watch Christian Colson's acceptance speech on YouTube, you will notice Irrfan standing in between Anil Kapoor and Loveleen Tandan—the film's co-director. Anil is beaming, while Irrfan seems to be measuring the

moment. He smiles, but is somewhat shocked and trying to grasp the magnitude of what had just happened.

A few years later, when *GQ India* magazine asked him why he was reserved on stage when his co-stars like Anil Kapoor were jumping with joy, this is what Irrfan said: 'There was no reason for me to be like that, because I'm not such a big part of the film. If I was playing Dev Patel's role, maybe I would have been dancing around. But for me, it was like, you know, somebody else is getting married and you're the one doing all the dancing. Also, temperamentally, I just can't. I don't know why, but I'm a shy guy. Maybe I became an actor to deal with that.'[5]

Despite being shy, from then on, Irrfan (and his other *Slumdog Millionaire* co-stars) did not have to worry about being noticed in the West. The success of the film led to Irrfan finding his manager and his agents in the US. The process of his crossing over to Hollywood was about to start, while he also continued to grow as an actor and a star in Indian cinema.

It was around this time that my trips to India, especially to Bombay, became more regular. And I often ran into Irrfan at Hindi film industry parties, at the Mumbai Film Festival, organized by the Mumbai Academy of Moving Image (MAMI) and even once at the JW Marriott in Juhu where he was with a large group of friends.

As Twitter became a regular part of our lives, I would often interact with Irrfan, appreciating his work in a range of films, especially in *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012), which won the actor his first and only National Film Award. I reviewed the film directed by his friend from his NSD days, Tigmanshu Dhulia. In the review I mentioned that Irrfan gave one of the finest performances of his career, 'comparable with his heartbreaking roles in *The Namesake* and the HBO series *In Treatment'*. I also wrote, 'Khan is a national treasure, a unique gifted Indian actor who uses his eyes, voice and other facial features to display the humour and then pathos in his characters.'

When I posted my review on Twitter, Irrfan responded, 'thank U. it took more than a decade to get a part like this. He's my inner voice.'

Irrfan's eyes remain one of his most striking features and he has learnt to depict a range of emotions using them. Mira Nair told me she was first drawn to Irrfan's hooded eyes.

In 2016 Tom Hanks was in Cancun, Mexico, promoting Ron Howard's film, *Inferno*. Asked about Irrfan Khan, his co-star in the film, he said, 'I'm just beguiled by his magic eyes. He has a physicality to him that is so specific

and endearing.’

Irrfan Khan, by all accounts, has an unusual and fascinating filmography. I loved him in *Life of Pi* (2012) and *The Lunchbox* (2013). In both the films, Irrfan’s characters live with so much pain, regret and a deep sense of loss that it is impossible not to cry with them. I can watch some of the scenes of *The Lunchbox* just to admire Irrfan’s quiet, meditative performance—heartbreaking—until he starts to feel the joy of falling in love.

After its premiere at Cannes in May 2013, *The Lunchbox* also premiered at the Telluride Film Festival, and a week later, at the TIFF. The first screening in Toronto at the Roy Thomson Hall ran into technical problems. To engage the audience, Irrfan, the film’s lead star, stood on the stage for nearly 40 minutes with his director Ritesh Batra, conducting an impromptu Q&A session. ‘No producer or director wants to cast me in love stories,’ Irrfan said, responding to someone who had asked him how he felt about playing a romantic character. ‘They don’t see love in me. The first time I came to TIFF was with *Maqbool*, and now with *The Lunchbox*. Both the films are love stories. Maybe because of TIFF I will be in more love stories.’

The packed auditorium with over 2,500 people—mostly South Asians from the city and its suburbs—had not yet seen the film, but still they waited patiently, loving every moment of that extra time in which they got to hear their favourite actor speak. No one complained that the screening was significantly delayed.

That Irrfan had made his mark in indie, art house cinema in India became even more evident when, in the same year, TIFF also premiered a second film of his—*Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost*—director Anup Singh’s Punjabi-language gender-bending folk tale about the Partition, dislocation and regret. At *The Lunchbox* after-party, I congratulated Irrfan for having two films at the festival. He seemed a bit concerned about how the audience in India would react to *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost*. But he was also basking in the fame and recognition, as more and more people walked up to him at the party to shake hands, take selfies or just stand there and look at the star.

In May 2015, I saw Irrfan in Shoojit Sircar’s *Piku*, in which he plays the

owner of a taxi service in South Delhi who, quite reluctantly, takes an eccentric old man with troubled bowel movement (Amitabh Bachchan) and his fiercely independent, short-tempered daughter (Deepika Padukone) on a road trip to Kolkata. Irrfan's Rana is stuck between a strange father-daughter duo. They love each other and yet are constantly bickering over small things. It was the first time I saw Irrfan's eyes sparkle with humour, as he would stare at the father and daughter in total disbelief. I tweeted about it and Irrfan responded by thanking me. 'It's a special film for me too,' he wrote.

While watching *Piku* I also sensed something new about Irrfan. He actually had quite a bit of sex appeal. Until then I had not thought about Irrfan as a sex symbol and no other filmmaker had explored that aspect of his personality. He had depicted flashes of romance in his earlier films, including a few warm moments with Tabu in the otherwise deeply sad film, *The Namesake*. In *Maqbool*, he and Tabu had some seductive moments. Irrfan usually comes across as an intense actor, very likeable, but mostly because he surprises us with his performances. But in *Piku* I saw Irrfan's Rana slowly fall in love with Deepika's Piku, especially when the two quietly exchange glances during the road trip. For a Hindi-language film, their romance takes a very long time to blossom, but it is real, and very believable.

Actor-director Tigmanshu Dhulia, his friend from NSD, also had similar thoughts on Irrfan's sensual appeal. 'Irrfan's got a great sex appeal and he triggers the sensitive side of women in an intellectual way. He's not for frivolous women, but for those with substance. Any woman who has some intellect will find Irrfan really attractive.'

I know I do not fall into the category of a 'woman who has intellect', but I think, with *Piku*, even I developed a man crush on Irrfan. To me, he is one of the sexiest and coolest actors working in Hindi cinema.

There have been times when a film was somewhat flawed, but Irrfan's performance had the ability to ensure that it was worth watching. I felt that about *D-Day* (2013). The film had an intense, tightly edited and thrilling opening sequence, but while the plot became a bit jumbled, Irrfan was exceptional in it. I loved how he carried Meghna Gulzar's *Talvar* (2015) on

his shoulders—a strong ensemble piece—giving a very nuanced performance. And then, partially because of the success of *Piku*, he appeared in a few more sweet middle-of-the-road romantic comedies such as *Hindi Medium*, *Qarib Qarib Singlle* (both from 2017), *Blackmail*, *Karwaan* and a small American indie film, *Puzzle* (all released in 2018).

Of course, Irrfan has acted in many more films—some perhaps not the best career choices, but every actor has to make compromises to earn a paycheck. For every loud *Thank You* (the 2011 Anees Bazmee comedy) and over-the-top *Jazbaa* (Sanjay Gupta's 2015 film, which was supposed to re-launch Aishwarya Rai's career)—both of which were trashed by critics and did not find much of an audience—there was a film like *The Song of Scorpions* (2017), which premiered at the Locarno Film Festival or *No Bed of Roses* (2017), Bangladesh's official entry for the Foreign Language Oscar. He has also acted in a few A-list Hollywood films, including *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *Jurassic World* (2015) and *Inferno* (2016).

Along the way he also started to produce films. So far he has produced a few projects—*Madaari* (2016) and *Qarib Qarib Singlle*—both with his wife Sutapa Sikdar and Shailja Kejriwal, a friend from the days Irrfan was working in television. And he was also given the title of producer for the Bangladeshi film *No Bed of Roses*.

Between 2015 and early 2018, Irrfan Khan acted in sixteen projects, including a mini-series, *Tokyo Trial* (2016), in which he played the role of Radha Binod Pal, one of the three Asian judges appointed to a tribunal to try Japanese war criminals after the Second World War. The three years were the busiest in Irrfan's young career as an actor. And it seemed nothing could stop him.

I began to work on this book in the late spring of 2018. By that time Irrfan was out of the country getting treatment for a rare form of cancer, a neuroendocrine tumour. His early messages shocked all of us, but I had faith that he would be back. I began to talk to people who he had worked with, starting with Tigmanshu Dhulia, and then Meghna Gulzar.

I felt that I should talk to Irrfan, at least to inform him that I was working

on this book. I wrote to his manager and she told me that in the past Irrfan had been contacted by publishing houses to write his autobiography and even by other authors who wanted to work on his life story. But at all times he was ‘dead against it’, she said. But perhaps he was in a different place, she added, and might be open to a book on him.

I sent a long email detailing my proposal for the book and I was told Irrfan would call from London where he was getting treatment. That call happened a few weeks later. I asked him how he was doing and he responded that he was better. ‘*Mujhe pata nahi yeh kaisi kitab hogi* (I do not know what kind of a book it will be),’ he said to me, sounding fairly cheerful. His voice was strong, and listening to him I could tell his condition was improving.

The call lasted about ten minutes. Irrfan declined to be interviewed for the book. ‘I am not in the right space just now,’ he said, and I did not insist. And then he went on to recommend some people I should talk to as well as a few online and print interviews with him that he had liked a lot.

During the fall of 2018 we exchanged a few more messages. He seemed cheerful at all times. Many film personalities I spoke to and interviewed for this book—Mira Nair, Tigmanshu Dhulia, Shailja Kejriwal, Vipin Sharma, the Bangladeshi filmmaker Mostofa Sarwar Farooki and Satish Kaushik—everyone told me they had met him in London and he was definitely responding to the treatment. Mira met him at a café and he borrowed her friend’s bicycle and rode it around the block. Shailja told me that Irrfan and Sutapa would often go out to eat or see plays in London.

All of that was encouraging and gave his well-wishers a lot of hope.

During a WhatsApp conversation with him I ended by saying, ‘I hope you are doing better.’

His response was sweet and moving. ‘I am not thinking about it at all. Whatever’ll happen will happen for the best.’

I knew he was going through a difficult time, and I wanted to respect his privacy.

So I did not pursue the possibility of an interview.

This book is an attempt at appreciation and a celebration of one of the finest

actors of our time, a prince among regular performers. It will take the readers on the journey of Irrfan's life and career, mostly looking at his key films.

According to IMDb.com, Irrfan has acted in 155 projects, most of which are films, and there is some television. Obviously, it is not possible to cover every film, and even top actors sometimes work on projects that are best forgotten. But in Irrfan's case, there are many remarkable films where he continually got the opportunity to shine, flex his acting muscles and share the vulnerable side of him that many Hindi film actors rarely get to do.

Most of these films are available online or on DVDs. There are some rare ones that I hope the readers will discover and perhaps (re)visit.

This is Irrfan's story, told through many voices and from many perspectives. It is an impossible feat to capture a man in the pages of a book; however, the attempt here is to present the incredible man, thinking actor and star in his various shades.

We are fortunate to be living in the times of Irrfan Khan, a genuine man, a good human being and an exceptional actor.

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[1] 'An actor whose eyes narrate a sea of stories', as quoted by Vinay Pathak on the television show *The House That Made Me* (the show streams on Netflix).

[2] The male lead in *Haider* (2014)

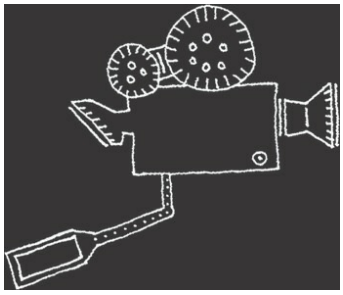
[3] The male lead in *The Namesake* (2006)

[4] The male lead in *Piku* (2015)

[5] 'Irrfan Khan: Top Dog', *GQ India*, 3 September 2012, https://www.gqindia.com/content/cover-story-irrfan-khan-top-dog

1

BORN TO FLY:
THE FORMATIVE YEARS



Umango bhari umar hai. Saare aalam ko fateh karne ka khwaab dekhne ki umar hai.[1]

Irrfan's was a wonderful childhood in a middle-class family in Rajasthan. He has precious memories of flying kites, playing cricket and going on hunting trips with his father. He was born as Sahabzade Irfan Ali Khan (as an adult he changed the spelling of his name, adding an extra r, perhaps for the sound of it, or it could also be on the recommendation of a numerologist) on 7 January 1967, one of four children—there was also an elder sister and two younger brothers—of Saeeda Begum and Yaseen Khan.

Yaseen Khan's family had land, but he gave his share to his brothers, moved to Jaipur and started his tyre business. His passion was hunting and he would often take young Irrfan along. 'I was interested in shooting guns, but I didn't like the idea of killing animals,' Irrfan would later tell actor Vinay Pathak on the television show *The House That Made Me* (the show streams on Netflix). He also didn't like eating meat as he hadn't developed a taste for it in his childhood. This led his father to often remark that Irrfan was a Brahmin born in a family of Pathans. Later, as an adult living in Bombay, Irrfan became well-known among friends for cooking a neat yakhni pulao.

There was also a constant conflict between his parents. His mother never liked hunting or sending her young boys to the forest. 'She was soft and philosophical and she never liked shikarbazi (hunting),' Irrfan told Anupam Kher on his television show *Kuch Bhi Ho Sakta Hai*. 'Their chemistry didn't match.'[2]

Irrfan loved flying kites, a passion that came at a price. He was seven when he fell from the terrace of his family's rented house, trying to catch a kite string that was hanging from an electric wire. He broke his left elbow and wrist. His father was out on a hunting trip and the family did not know how to treat the injury. A masseur came, pulled and massaged the elbow and made it straight. It took him two years to recover from the trauma. There was already the pain from the fractures and injury, and on top of that, kids would make fun of him in school.

‘I started going into my shell,’ he told film journalist Anupama Chopra during an interview on the show *FC Unfiltered*.[3] He had always been shy, but the accident resulted in him losing all his confidence. While lying in bed one day, he developed a game to amuse himself. He would lift his hand at the wrist and then guess if it would fall towards the front or the back of the hand. Now Irrfan jokes about that memory, but the trauma of the injury stayed with him when he travelled first to Delhi to attend classes in NSD, and even later, when he moved to Bombay to work in television.

His mother was the strongest figure in his life, but Irrfan struggled to connect with her. He wanted to be close to her, but they would end up arguing. He was always looking for moments to please her and to get her approval. As a child, he found solace in the company of his nani (maternal grandmother) instead. His childhood memories are rich with the times he spent in Tonk with his nani, putting his head on her lap and, of course, flying kites. His nani had apparently even taught him how to tie his pyjama drawstring. She was a hakim (a physician using herbs and traditional medicine for treatment). ‘Her hands often smelt like the herbs that she’d use to treat patients,’ he told *Open* magazine in an interview.[4] ‘I’d spend months with her, learning how she healed people.’ Since his father was mostly absent, out hunting, Irrfan’s childhood was inspired by strong women, including his mother, sister and aunt, but especially his nani. ‘My granny was an epitome of positivity. She looked at me with so much adoration and touched me without words. It was enough for me. I was a sucker for her love.’

In early 2006, Irrfan was shooting for Mira Nair’s *The Namesake* in the US. The location was a suburban house in New Jersey. The production design team had hung real pictures of Irrfan and Tabu’s families on the bedroom walls of the house to give it a sense of authenticity. Walking past the pictures, Irrfan suddenly spotted one of him with his nani. It was a surreal moment. ‘I said to myself, my nani has come all the way to New Jersey,’ he told Anupam Kher. ‘I started crying.’[5]

As a child, Irrfan believed in God. In an episode for ABP’s show, *Selfie*,[6] he recalled getting tears of joy whenever he would think of God. He would wait for prayer time to communicate with God. His relationship with God portrays the innocence of his childhood. ‘But that fascination with God wore off,’ he said on the show. He began to question what he would be told by adults—that he had to make deals to be close to God. He would remain a

non-believer through his adult life.

He stopped praying as an adult and does not observe Ramzan. Varun Gautam, his friend from his theatre days in Jaipur, recalls, 'Once I wished him Eid Mubarak and he responded by saying, "*Arre yaar aaj Eid hai kya* (Is it Eid today, my friend)?" But he remained spiritual in his own way.'

Irrfan's parents sent him to an English-medium school—Saint Paul's. His mother hoped the strong basic education would eventually get him a good job, perhaps as a lecturer. His father was keener to get his sons to learn a trade. Education was not very high on his list of priorities.

Irrfan was around 18 when he lost his father. His uncle told him something had happened to his father in the bathroom. At that moment, he felt like he experienced the Hindi idiom *pairon tale zameen khisak jaana* (felt like the ground was slipping from under his feet). He ran at full speed, looking for a doctor. By the time he returned home with the doctor, his father had passed away.

'I remember the way he would place his hand on my forehead,' Irrfan said about his father. 'I don't know what it was about. I was always very aloof, so I didn't have much interaction with him.'[7] But towards the last years of Yaseen Khan's life, as Irrfan's parents' marriage was getting strained, the father became more focused on his eldest son.

A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man

His parents did not encourage Irrfan and his siblings to watch films. An uncle who lived in Tonk would take the kids to the movies when he visited Jaipur. He recalled watching *Dharma* (a 1973 film starring Rekha and Navind Nischol) with this uncle. And during his schooldays Irrfan watched *Naya Daur* (1957), starring Dilip Kumar. 'There was something mysterious and fascinating in what these actors were doing,' he said in *Selfie*. 'I wanted to know that and do it.' But he could not share his dream with anyone. As it is, he felt that physically he did not have the traits to become an actor, let alone a star. He knew he had a dark skin tone, his hooded eyes were often red in colour from all the time he spent out in the sun flying kites and he was rather

shy. But the desire to become an actor had taken root within him from a very early age.

During his teenage years, Irrfan saw two film shoots in Jaipur—*Ganga Ki Saugand* (1978), starring Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha, and a couple of years later, *Jalmahal* (1980), starring Jeetendra and Rekha again. During the shoot of *Jalmahal*, Irrfan noticed the director explain the role to Jeetendra. 'And I thought to myself, if he can explain, then why can't he play the role himself?' Irrfan said, laughing on Vinay Pathak's show.

Irrfan was concerned about his own looks and he often wondered if he could become an actor. And then he saw Mithun Chakraborty in Mrinal Sen's National Film Award-winning *Mrigayaa* (1977). 'If he could become an actor, then perhaps I could also try,' he said.[8]

After college, Irrfan joined a two-year diploma programme in Dramatic Arts in the University of Rajasthan. He started with a certificate course and attended evening classes. The next year, it became a full-time diploma programme. There, he met fellow student Varun Gautam and a deep friendship developed between the two. 'The day I met him, I observed him and told him—you will become a star,' Varun recalls, adding how he can assess people's personalities and see their future by reading faces. 'There was a certain depth in his eyes. They are really penetrating eyes. And he was very humble, down to earth. Even after he became a star he remained humble.'

'Somehow I felt that he would become a famous man,' Varun adds. 'I told him that. He started laughing. "*Kya baat kar rahe ho* (What are you saying)?" he asked. That was the first interaction we had.'

'*Kuch logon se mil ke aapko achha lagta hai—warmth hoti hai* (Some people have a certain warmth and it feels good to meet them),' Varun says. Instead of the usual things that young men often talk about, Irrfan and Varun would have philosophical conversations about life. 'He has always been inquisitive about life and beyond. And since I was into astrology and things like that, we developed a special bond.'

The two would ride their bicycles together to their drama programme, even though they lived in different parts of Jaipur—Varun stayed in the university campus, while Irrfan and his family lived in the old part of the city. Varun remembers a couple of plays they worked in together—*Bakri*, by Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena, and *Hori*, based on Premchand's classic novel, *Godaan*. They had their rehearsals in a venue called the Ravindra Manch. Their mentor in those days was Ravi Chaturvedi, a graduate of NSD (class of

1981). Irrfan acted in G.P. Deshpande's *Udhvasta Dharamshala* with Chaturvedi. 'In *Udhvasta Dharamshala*, Irrfan's performance was very good,' Varun says. 'He had a strong presence. He seemed to be carrying the play.'

In the meantime, Irrfan also acted in a few plays that were mere replications of popular Hindi films. There are many stories from those days; one such story was when, while performing on stage, Irrfan had to walk with a shawl on and a drink in hand, reminiscent of Rajesh Khanna and his hit movies. A radio, placed in the corner, was playing a Hindi film song, and like Rajesh Khanna, Irrfan was supposed to throw the glass to stop the music playing. He did throw the glass at the radio, but the person handling the music backstage did not get the cue and the song kept playing. Now it all sounds amusing, but for a young man who was just trying out his luck at becoming an actor, that moment must have been embarrassing.

Being bitten by the acting bug, Irrfan began to focus on trying to get admission in NSD, the only such national institute that offered acting training to young students. He had heard that both Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah had graduated from NSD. Also, the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune had shut down its acting programme.

Bidding Adieu to Jaipur

'My life started when I got admission in NSD,' he told Vinay Pathak on the television show *The House That Made Me*. 'Before that I was inside an egg. I wasn't born yet.' Irrfan's chapter in Jaipur was closed and the young actor was ready to take on the world.

However, the NSD admission policy required that the applicants should have acted in at least ten plays. Irrfan had not performed in ten plays yet, and so he padded his application with small lies, including names of plays he had not acted in.

'They must have liked something in me,' Irrfan later told actor Anupam Kher.[9] 'I had so much sincerity and honesty and desire to learn. I had even lied to them about what I would do after graduation. I told them I would do

theatre, although I only wanted to act in films.'

Among those who interviewed him for the NSD admission was Mohan Maharishi, who had served as the school's director from 1984–86. He had also graduated from NSD two decades earlier, in 1965. Mohan was one of the guests on the 2012 NDTV show, *It's My Life*, focusing on Irrfan Khan. Raveena Tandon was the anchor of the show. 'He had such concentration and he really wanted to join the National School of Drama,' Mohan said on the show, adding that he could tell Irrfan had a future in theatre.[10] The main concern that teachers like Mohan had was whether, upon graduating from NSD, someone like Irrfan would continue working in theatre or get lured by the glamour and glitz of the film world. And then, addressing Irrfan, he said, 'You told a beautiful lie and said it so convincingly. And now you are living the life you wanted so well.'

Even though Irrfan was offered a scholarship at NSD, there were family matters to attend to before he moved to Delhi. Irrfan's father had recently passed away and as the eldest son, he was expected to take over the family's tyre shop. But Irrfan's younger brother Imran Khan stepped in and offered to run the business. His mother was under the assumption that after graduation, Irrfan would go back and take up a respectful job in Jaipur. She wanted all her children to live close by and make a small living. Her brother (Irrfan's maternal uncle) had left for Bombay, never to return home, and she did not want to lose her son to the big city. But Irrfan had other plans in life. He was destined to spread his wings.

'Human beings are born to fly and to grow,' he told Vinay Pathak. 'If you can't grow in your life, then there is no purpose.'

Later, on Anupam Kher's show, *Kuch Bhi Ho Sakta Hai*, Irrfan quoted from the late Girish Karnad's classic play, *Tughlaq*, suggesting that by joining NSD he felt he could do just about anything: '*Umango bhari umar hai. Saare aalam ko fateh karne ka khwaab dekhne ki umar hai* (My life and age is full of hope. It is the age to dream of capturing the entire world).' A delighted Anupam, who graduated from NSD in 1978, joined Irrfan in reciting the line.

At the Mecca of Theatre

While he managed to get admission into NSD, Irrfan took a while to shed his shy, introverted personality. His NSD friends remember him as someone who did not mingle much with others. There was a quieter but focused side to him. It is also possible that since he was from a small town, he was perhaps a bit uncomfortable in the presence of others who came from big cities.

The NSD men's hostel was located on Vakil Lane. '*Hostel mein bilkul bekaar sa kamra tha uska, chhota sa, kone mein* (In the hostel he had a useless room, small, and located in a corner),' his friend Tigmanshu Dhulia says. Tishu, as his friends and now Hindi film industry colleagues call him, was two years junior to Irrfan (class of 1989). Most first-year NSD students apparently had to share rooms, with a couple of them staying in each room. But Irrfan had managed to get one of the two single rooms.

Actor Vipin Sharma, also an NSD graduate (class of 1983), has the same reaction when he remembers Irrfan's room. 'It was in the corner, and we had to pass by his room to go to the bathroom.' Although he had graduated a year before Irrfan joined, Vipin would often spend time at the men's hostel, meeting friends and staying over at night with younger students such as Tishu and Sanjay Mishra (both graduated in 1989).

'There was a window. I have that image of Irrfan, sitting inside the room or by the window, smoking beedi.' Vipin believes that Irrfan deliberately chose that room. 'From the beginning he seemed aloof, but maybe he needed his space,' he says. 'In retrospect, I now think that is the reason why he chose that room. Perhaps he wanted to stay in his own world.'

Irrfan's class had a total of 18 students, most with scholarships, and all coming from different parts of India; some from smaller towns, while others from big cities. And some barely spoke any English. Two close friends Irrfan would go on to make were both from big cities—Mita Vashisht from Chandigarh and Sutapa Sikdar from Delhi (Irrfan and Sutapa would start dating soon after they joined NSD).

The students would spend long, intense hours with each other—holding addas at the tea shop at Mandi House, eating parathas at 2 a.m., arguing, competing, rehearsing plays and collaborating. 'All the things that you expect from a group of young students studying to become actors—a little masti, a little joking,' Sutapa recalled on the show *Selfie*. They were driven by this desire to do something larger, different from the course of life that their

families had envisioned for them. ‘We were all coming as rebels leaving our families,’ Mita says. ‘Nobody was pursuing the safe profession.’

Speaking about Irrfan, Mita remembers not noticing him in the beginning. ‘He was a lanky guy with a curly mop of hair, really skinny, with bags under his eyes. But he had an incredible grin. It was a very shy grin and completely wicked. And he had this voice. I am someone who likes textured voices. It wasn’t a deep voice; it was a twangy voice like a banjo.’

Each person from the class has innumerable stories from those early days. Mita recalls an anecdote from when they were still in the first year. One morning, Mita and Irrfan came to blows in class. She cannot recall what they fought over, but this much she remembers: ‘He said something and I said something. Next thing I knew, we were hitting each other and the class had to draw us apart.’ They stayed friends as well as competitors through the three years at NSD, often acting together in plays and then performing in the same television shows and films after they graduated.

Another person I spoke to about Irrfan Khan was his NSD teacher Ram Gopal Bajaj—affectionately called Bajjo Bhai—who was also a graduate of NSD (class of 1965). Now 79, Bajjo Bhai still continues to act in television and films.

‘*Irrfan sabse sehma hua tha* (Irrfan was the most nervous of the lot),’ Bajjo Bhai recalls. ‘I see a connection between him being lean, with bulging eyes, angry and yet *sehma hua ke kuch kar nahi sakta* (and yet nervous that he could not do anything). My feeling is that Irrfan didn’t have a friend in class, except for Sutapa. He was basically a loner and that is why I noticed him.’ And then he adds, ‘There was some kind of inner gentleness in that boy, which perhaps carries on.’

Despite their varied backgrounds, Bajjo Bhai believes that there was one thing in common among the students. ‘They were often dropouts from the society and academics, and they took the unconventional path of coming to a drama school.’

However, Irrfan did stand out in one way. He thought hanging out, drinking chai at addas, having late night conversations and arguments with classmates was a waste of time. ‘The background Irrfan came from, he didn’t have a lot of exposure,’ Sutapa said on *Selfie.*[11] Since Sutapa was from Delhi, she had been exposed to theatre and the arts. She could see the hunger in Irrfan to learn fast, the desperate desire to catch up with the rest of his peers, and soak up as much as possible so he could be at par with them.

Tishu agrees. ‘I have seen Irrfan’s growth over the years,’ he says. ‘He had come from Jaipur, where he didn’t have a lot of exposure to philosophy and ideas. But by watching, observing, reading and discovering world cinema, he grew rather fast. I have many friends, but in Irrfan, that development is remarkable.’

‘He would always be reading books; there was always the latest script of a play in his hand,’ Sutapa added. ‘I don’t remember any other classmate who would carry so many scripts and books in their hand.’

Sometimes Sutapa’s mother would invite the entire class for dinner to their home in Delhi. ‘We would all be having fun and partying,’ Sutapa said. ‘But Irrfan would enter the house and head straight to my brother’s bookshelf. My brother had a large collection of Russian literature. My mother would say in Bengali, ‘Please call that poor boy. Since he’s walked in he’s been sitting there and reading.’

Director Tigmanshu Dhulia remains one of the key characters in Irrfan’s story. Vipin Sharma takes credit for having introduced Tishu to Irrfan. ‘I remember, Tigmanshu and Irrfan wouldn’t talk much in those days,’ he says. ‘I had not seen any of Irrfan’s plays. But I kept hearing that he’s good.’ So Vipin asked Tishu to meet Irrfan and chat. And that’s how the three of them became close.

Tishu and Irrfan first connected over their common interest in films. Tishu was seriously interested in directing films and wanted to use the NSD training as a stepping stone to the Hindi film industry. And Irrfan wanted to act in films. They would spend a lot of time watching and talking about Hollywood films starring actors like Robert De Niro and Al Pacino, and the works of Martin Scorsese. Together they would discuss other international filmmakers, such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder. ‘Films connected us,’ Tishu says.

It was not until Irrfan was in the third year that Tishu actually realized what a strong actor he was. In the final year Irrfan’s class performed *Talghar*, the Hindi version of Maxim Gorky’s *Lower Depths*. ‘From that day I became a fan of his,’ Tishu says. ‘His performance was different than that of all the other actors in their class; his approach was different.’

Talghar was translated into Hindi by Jeet Kaushik and directed by Ram Gopal Bajaj. Irrfan was cast in the role of Andrei Mitritch Kleshtch—a brutal man who makes his living as a locksmith. Irrfan’s character has beaten and abused his wife Anna to the extent that she is dying. In fact, she dies as the

play progresses. Mita Vashisht played Anna. ‘I had the smallest inconsequential role,’ Mita says. ‘I was in one corner of the stage with Irrfan. I just had to lie there and I remember Irrfan always trying to figure out the nuts and bolts of his performance.’

‘Irrfan wasn’t following any grammar, and it was premature to say anything, since they were all young students,’ Bajjo Bhai says. ‘They had come without any prior training. There was no style. NSD or any such institute is the first platform of training for all of them. You could only see the possibilities that this boy or girl would have in the first or second year.’ But he adds that Irrfan’s sensitivity, plus the fact that he was a loner, lost in his own world, did translate into good acting. ‘He was good in the play and showed the inner anguish of the character. His character had the frustration and hopelessness at not being able to provide for his wife. Otherwise he is very gentle, romantic,’ Bajjo Bhai adds.

Years later, Tishu would be instrumental in getting Irrfan some big breaks on television, and eventually in films. He was the casting director for Asif Kapadia’s *The Warrior* (2001), having earlier done similar work on Shekhar Kapur’s *Bandit Queen* (1994). Tishu would also cast Irrfan in his first directorial venture, *Haasil* (2003), and that resulted in Vishal Bhardwaj offering him the lead role in *Maqbool* (2003), his adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth.*

The Real Inspiration

One thing Irrfan’s NSD classmates remember is his obsession with Naseeruddin Shah. In the 1980s, the young students at NSD had a few role models—actors with independent spirits who were pioneers in the new wave or parallel cinema movement, and Naseer was definitely one of them, along with Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil and Om Puri.

‘We would all tease him about it,’ Mita Vashisht says. ‘It was like, “*Arre yaar Irrfan, Naseer ko chhod do* (Please, Irrfan, forget about Naseer).” But it was how he wanted to approach a role, the way he wanted perform. We often saw Naseer in his performances.’

Years later Irrfan was honest enough to confess to Naseeruddin Shah how much the senior actor had inspired him. ‘I am glad he didn’t try to become another Naseeruddin Shah, and discovered his own identity,’ Naseer says. ‘He told me, “My mother used to curse you.” So I asked, “*Why yaar*?” and he said, “*Tum uss Naseeruddin Shah ki nakal kar rahe ho. Woh to pahunch gaya, aur tum kahan ho* (You always imitate that Naseeruddin Shah. He has made it big, and where are you)?” So finally when he made it, I said, “*Yaar, apni ammi ko mera salaam kehna. And tell her ki main itna bura example nahi tha* (My friend, give my salaam to your mother. And tell her that I was really not that bad an example).”’

An Actor Evolves

Irrfan did not actively pursue theatre after graduating from NSD. But Tishu remembers him from one more performance—*Lal Ghas Par Neele Ghode*, the Hindi translation of Mikhail Shatrov’s Russian play, *Blue Horses on Red Grass*. Sahitya Akademi Award-winning poet and writer Uday Prakash did the translation of the play, and one of the important NSD teachers, Prasanna, directed it. Irrfan played the role of Vladimir Lenin in the play.

Tishu recalls that Irrfan bore no resemblance to Lenin, yet he brought the ethos of the character in his performance. He goes on to talk about the performance as brilliant and adds that even then, Irrfan did not believe in a lot of histrionics and melodrama. He was very subtle and very restrained. He had a deep understanding that an actor didn’t have to explain everything by speaking. He was a very practical actor. Mita Vashisht agrees. ‘Irrfan was a fine balance of a guy, with all his vulnerability. He had his focus in the right place. He had very high emotional intelligence. He knew what he wanted in life emotionally, which many of us didn’t. I didn’t.’

There were others who remember watching Irrfan evolve as an actor while he was at NSD. Dancer and choreographer Bharat Sharma taught a movement class, inspired by classical Indian dance, to Irrfan and his batchmates. It was in the fourth semester, a one-hour early morning class, from 8–9 a.m. Most of the students would be up late at night and often many

would not show up for the class. If they did show up, they would argue about the value of the training Bharat was giving them. ‘They all wanted to follow Naseer and Om’s path,’ Bharat says. ‘So I don’t blame them since that is how acting was perceived. They would question me, often asking, ‘*Iska kya fayda hai* (What is the point of this)?’

Bharat remembers Irrfan’s dedication. ‘When he did show up, he would focus on the class with all sincerity,’ he says. He also remembers Irrfan being embarrassed about his left arm, the trauma of the childhood accident. ‘He was very conscious of it.’

Years later, filmmaker Shyam Benegal would notice the same physical problem with Irrfan. Shyam Babu cast Irrfan on two television shows—the episode ‘Ward no. 6’ (1986), based on Anton Chekhov’s story, part of the *Katha Sagar* series, and *Bharat Ek Khoj* (1988), made soon after the actor had graduated from NSD. ‘He was brilliant,’ Shyam Babu says, ‘(But) I remember him being extremely conscious of one of his arms, which was a trifle shorter due to a childhood accident.’

Barry John, who ran Delhi’s prestigious amateur actors’ company, Theatre Action Group (where the likes of Shahrukh Khan, Mira Nair and Manoj Bajpayee got their training), did workshops at NSD, part of a Theatre in Education project. While Barry did not teach Irrfan’s class, he saw the actor in a one-man show at NSD. He has forgotten the name of the play but he clearly remembers the performance. ‘It was in an intimate studio theatre, a tight space,’ Barry says. ‘He was alone, but commanded everyone’s attention, even at that time. He would have been in the second or third year.’

Barry remembers Irrfan after he had graduated from NSD. The British director lived in a barsati in South Delhi’s Jangpura neighbourhood, and many young actors would drop by for adda—tea, food and conversations. There was once even a theatre workshop conducted by veteran theatre personality Badal Sircar. Irrfan and Manoj Bajpayee were regulars at such gatherings. In 2009, during the promotion of the film *Billu*, Irrfan would comment that this was where he first met his co-star from the film, Shahrukh Khan, then a struggling actor in Delhi.

One Door Closes, Another Opens

In 1986, Harvard University-trained and New York-based filmmaker Mira Nair was about to cast actors for her first feature, *Salaam Bombay* (1988), a heartbreaking tale of Bombay's streets kids, with a haunting score by classical Indian violinist

L. Subramaniam. Nair's Harvard friend Sooni Taraporevala wrote the script of the film that was eventually nominated for an Oscar in the Best Foreign Language Film category (one of the three Indian films to be nominated in that category since the introduction of the Oscars in 1929). Nair wanted to mix trained actors with non-actors (mostly Bombay street kids) and so she went to NSD, the Mecca of theatre in India to find young trained actors she could cast in the film.

She dropped into classes randomly, hoping to recruit young actors who could mingle with street children she had planned to cast in *Salaam Bombay.* One day she went to a basement workshop, and that is where she spotted Irrfan Khan.

'Immediately,' Mira says. 'I have an eye for this, but I also noticed his focus, his intensity, his very remarkable look—his hooded eyes. I clocked him. I didn't speak to him.' Next day Mira returned to NSD to observe Irrfan again. This time she spoke to him and asked him if he wanted to be a part of a theatre workshop that would lead to a role in *Salaam Bombay*. Irrfan was twenty years old at that time and he immediately said yes. This is what had brought Irrfan to Delhi, the dream, the hope that one day, he would act in films in Bombay.

Irrfan took special permission, and a couple of months later, he went to Bombay. Mira had rented a flat on Bombay's Pedder Road, right above where Shyam Benegal lived. She was staying there with cinematographer Sandi Sissel who would later shoot *Salaam Bombay*. There were also a few empty rooms, and sometimes the street kids who were in the workshop would spend the night. Any kid, if he or she didn't have a bed for the night, could show up. Raghubir Yadav (NSD, class of 1977), who had played the lead in *Massey Sahib* (1987) and was eventually cast as Chillum in *Salaam Bombay*, also stayed in the flat. 'And then there was Irrfan,' Mira says. 'And we all lived together.'

Mira considered Irrfan for the role of Salim, one of the street kids. While

she wanted to immediately cast him, she also wanted him to work with the kids. Before the workshop started, documentary filmmaker Nilita Vachani (she got the credit of script supervisor for *Salaam Bombay*, but like others who worked on the film, Nilita also wore many hats) approached nearly 120 children she met on the streets. Mira eventually chose 24 of them and Barry John came down from Delhi to help with the training. Sooni Taraporevala adds that Mira was nervous about casting all the street kids who had never acted. 'So, including Raghubir and Irrfan in the group was like a security blanket,' she says.

There was no question in Mira's mind of not casting Irrfan. But when the director and her team started finalizing the kids, they realized something they had not thought about. Because of malnourishment, the kids were short, some barely reaching Mira's torso. As the cameras were brought in and test shots were done, Irrfan, at 6 feet 1 inch, seemed like an odd man around the street children. His build, and the nourishment he had received in a middle-class family, made him stand out. 'The rest of them were undernourished, wizened little children,' Mira says.

Sandi Sissel also pointed out that Irrfan looked so much older and taller than the other kids. Sooni recalls Sandi feeling that Irrfan would not seem like a kid and they would appear as a gang of juvenile delinquents, rather than street kids.

'So I had to uncast him and I made the very difficult decision just two days before the shoot,' Mira says. 'He heard me and totally understood it. And I told him, "*Irrfan bhai, ek hi scene bacha hai* (there is only one small scene left to be cast), the letter scribe one, which is a beautiful scene by itself." Sooni had written a whole story in one scene. I said, "*Yeh kar dijiye abhi* (please do this for now), but I owe you." He knew this and I kept my word.'

Irrfan would work again with Mira, although not as soon as they had both expected. In 2007, Mira cast him as a married, closeted gay man in the short, *Migration,* one of four *AIDS Jaago* films she had produced for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Irrfan also played the lead opposite Natalie Portman in another short Nair directed for the anthology, *New York, I Love You* (2008). And, of course, she gave him the plum role of Ashoke Ganguli—by all counts the best performance of Irrfan's career—in *The Namesake* (2006).

Mira felt that Irrfan understood the reason for not getting cast in *Salaam*

Bombay, but even so, he was bitterly disappointed. ‘I comforted him by saying something clichéd, like “One door closes, another opens”, Sooni Taraporevala says. ‘But I did sincerely mean that, since I knew something else would come up for him. Unfortunately for him, it was a long time before something came along.’

‘He was so excited and then so disappointed,’ Sutapa said on *Selfie*. ‘He actually cried a lot.’ And in an interview Irrfan said, ‘I remember sobbing all night when Mira told me that my part was reduced to merely nothing. But it changed something within me. I was prepared for anything after that.’[12]

He had spent two months in Bombay and had gotten close to the kids. He was still at NSD and life had seemed so uncertain. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a big opportunity came his way. And just when he had begun to enjoy the process and gotten involved with the team, he was told his time was up and he had to leave. It must have also been very difficult to come back to NSD and face his classmates. Surely some of them were envious of the opportunity Irrfan had been presented with. Now Irrfan would have to face them all.

The clip for the short scene with Irrfan in *Salaam Bombay* is available on YouTube.[13] Indeed it is a lovely scene where the film’s protagonist, young Krishna (Shafiq Syed), comes to Irrfan, a letter-writer sitting on a sidewalk in Bombay. Krishna has already narrated most of the letter addressed to his mother—how he got lost, landed in Bombay and now works as a helper at a tea stall. And then suddenly, with his wide eyes that reveal months of sadness living as a street kid, Krishna says, ‘*Sone ke time teri bahut yaad aati hai* (I remember you a lot when I go to sleep.).’ Irrfan’s letter-writer says, ‘*Bas, bas, dus line ho gaya hai. Aage likhne ka pachas paise extra lagega* (Enough, enough, ten lines are done. I will charge 50 paise extra for writing more).’

When Krishna realizes he does not know his exact address, Irrfan’s letter-writer rebukes him. Krishna walks away feeling dejected, while the letter-writer crumples the paper and tosses it into the garbage. We do not like the letter-writer, but this last action is what makes Irrfan’s brief role stand out.

In Good Company

Friendships, formed during NSD and even before that, continued to blossom in Bombay. Irrfan reached Bombay in the late 1980s. Varun Gautam went to Bombay in 1986. Other than a brief meeting with Irrfan in Jaipur, they had lost touch. 'There were no cell phones and social media and we didn't write letters,' Varun says. Then, a few years later, Varun saw Irrfan on a road near Esic Nagar, in the Andheri West part of Bombay, heading to Juhu. '*Arre aa gaye kya* (So you are here now)?' they both said to each other. Irrfan and Sutapa were together at that time. 'They were married by then,' Varun recalls. 'They never had a big expensive wedding. Their live-in situation extended into a marriage.' Other friends from Jaipur reconnected, and Irrfan and Sutapa's flat became a central meeting point. 'Irrfan had a Yezdi bike in those days,' Varun adds.

Varun feels that what makes Irrfan stand apart is the one quality that he constantly keeps striving for more in life. Varun has never seen Irrfan happy and he senses that there is something inside the actor that has always kept him dissatisfied, always making him desire to achieve more, to become better. 'His mind is always occupied with philosophical questions. He keeps analysing things. He's always engaged in such thoughts,' Varun says.

A similar but more positive view about Irrfan is shared by a more recent friend—writer and producer Shailja Kejriwal. Irrfan and Sutapa met Shailja in the mid-1990s in Bombay, long after they graduated from NSD. They worked on the television show *Star Bestsellers*, and then, many years later, the professional and personal friendship led Shailja to produce two films with Irrfan—*Madaari* (2016) and *Qarib Qarib Singlle* (2017).

'Irrfan is a person who is always saying "*Kuch aur karte hain* (Let's do something more),"' Shailja says. 'I think he has such a fertile mind that he just feels, "Oh, I have not done this, so let me break that barrier for myself." He doesn't want to be a person who is resting on his laurels. He could be saying, "Now I have a Hollywood film, so let me do it." But he is always looking to do something new for himself.'

Tigmanshu Dhulia would go a long way to satisfy Irrfan's professional desire to do more challenging work. Tishu arrived in Bombay in 1993 after the completion of *Bandit Queen*. There was a big exodus of actors from Delhi, Bhopal and other cities who had performed in the film, some of them being Saurabh Shukla, Manoj Bajpayee, Seema Biswas, Nirmal Pandey and Tishu himself. 'And Delhi's Mandi House actually looked empty,' Tishu says, laughing. 'The addas outside the tea shop at Mandi House were over.'

Ram Gopal Bajaj stayed on in Delhi and eventually lost touch with Irrfan. More than a decade later, during a visit to Bombay, he went to director Ketan Mehta and his actress wife Deepa Sahi's residence in Madh Island for a party. Bajjo Bhai knew that Sudhir Mishra was one of their neighbours, but he was pleasantly surprised to see Irrfan and Sutapa taking a walk outside Ketan Mehta's building. 'It was around Christmas and I was carrying a Santa Claus mask,' he says. 'I remember getting a selfie with them. It felt nice, and they were happy to see me as well.'

Vipin Sharma had migrated to Canada around the time Irrfan graduated from NSD. He became a film editor there. But he would make trips to India and reconnect with Irrfan and Tigmanshu Dhulia in Bombay. He would often spend time with Irrfan, talking about acting, and how so many Hindi films were loud in their style. During one of his trips to India, Irrfan asked him to watch *Maqbool*.

'He said, "*Hindi cinema badal raha hai* (Hindi cinema is changing),"' Vipin recalls. 'I saw the film, called him and told him that I wanted to act also. I had totally given up. His response was that I would have to return to India.' Vipin had been away from India for nearly thirteen years but that one conversation with Irrfan made him go back to Canada and participate in acting workshops.

On the NDTV show, *It's My Life*, Vipin had previously recorded a brief interview about Irrfan in which he had started to cry.

'When I was called on stage, they showed my clip where I cried. Irrfan looked at me and asked, "You cried for me? Did you really cry?" And I said, "Yes I did." He responded, "This is great, yaar, because people normally do not express emotions like this for others in this industry."' And he adds, 'Irrfan and my relationship is such that I get very emotional. I start to cry thinking about our friendship. I have always felt that Irrfan is a very ruhani (spiritual) guy. He connects with people. I do feel very close to him, and I have always admired his work.'

Irrfan and Mita Vashisht's careers moved at different paces. Her career took off rather early—from a supporting role in Yash Chopra's *Chandni* (1989) and Mani Kaul's *Siddeshwari* (1990) to being Dimple Kapadia's close friend in Govind Nihalani's *Drishti* (1990), in which Irrfan also played a small role, and two films directed by Kumar Shahani—*Khayal Gatha* (1989) and *Kasba* (1991). Irrfan's film career, on the other hand, took off a little late.

In 1990, the International Film Festival of India was held in Calcutta.

Mita had two films running—*Siddeshwari* and *Khayal Gatha*. She was an official guest at the festival with a room at Hotel Hindustan International. Irrfan, struggling, with a few television shows, turned up at the festival with Vipin Sharma, who was on a visit from Canada. The two friends did not have a place to spend the night, so they crashed on the floor in Mita's hotel room.

'Next morning I had to get them out before housekeeping arrived at 6 a.m.,' Mita recalls. 'One of them said, "*Chai to peene de* (Let us at least have tea)," and I responded, "*Jao dhaba mein pee lo* (Go have it in a dhaba)." And they left while I cleared up the mess they had left behind with their blankets.'

Their paths kept crossing. Mita recalls an NSD gathering after the success of *Haasil* and *Maqbool*. Irrfan and Tigmanshu Dhulia were surrounded by junior graduates from the drama school. Irrfan walked up to Mita to catch up. His second son Ayaan was born by then. 'He was delighted about it,' Mita recalls. 'He described to me how the baby sleeps without any care in the world.' And then he asked her how she was doing. 'I told him things had slowed down and no good work was coming my way,' she adds. 'He offered to introduce me to a numerologist he was consulting. That was so nice of him. Who does that otherwise?'

In November 2016 Mita was at Jairangam—the Jaipur Theatre Festival. She performed in the Kashmiri play *Lal Ded* on the opening day of the festival. Irrfan was the brand ambassador of the festival and he arrived the following day. A volunteer informed *Mita* that Irrfan was on the stage and he had asked for her. 'Suddenly I hear Irrfan's voice booming on the speaker, "*Arre yaar Mita, aa jaa. Kahan hai? Kitna intezaar karoon* (Hey Mita, please come. Where are you? How much longer should I wait)?" Irrfan was presented a bouquet of flowers. And then he spoke, "*Isse pehle ki mujhse koi sawal pooche main yeh bouquet apni classmate aur dost Mita Vashisht ko dena chahta hoon. Woh NSD mein meri prerna thi* (Before you start to ask me questions, I want to present this bouquet of flowers to my classmate and friend Mita Vashisht. She was an inspiration for me in NSD)."'

'He gave me the bouquet and sat down,' she says. 'He didn't have to do it. It was something so sweet and delicate.'

She refers to Irrfan as her NSD sibling and buddy. 'Whether he had work or not, or whether he became a star or not, it made no difference to me in the way that I would be with him.' It was natural that in the way the world perceived him, Irrfan had changed, rather, evolved, as he became a bigger star in India and abroad. And perhaps it did change him a bit. But our

relationship didn't change,' she adds.

Post-NSD days, Irrfan's struggles and disappointments would set in. He would have work—a lot of television, some minor films, but as Varun Gautam said, it would take a lot more to satisfy the actor in him.

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[1]'My life and age is full of hope. It is the age to dream of capturing the entire world.' From the play, *Tughlaq*, by Girish Karnad.

[2]*Kuch Bhi Ho Sakta Hai*, Season 2, Episode 5, 30 August 2015, https://www.voot.com/shows/the-anupam-kher-show-s02/2/383623/the-warrior/383780

[3]'Irrfan Khan Interview with Anupama Chopra', Film Companion, *Hindi Medium*, 8 May 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lbjz76KV5ok&t=518s

[4]'I am never good enough for myself', *Open*, 6 December 2017, https://openthemagazine.com/cinema/i-am-never-good-enough-for-myself/

[5]*Kuch Bhi Ho Sakta Hai,*, Season 2, Episode 5, 30 August, 2015, https://www.voot.com/shows/the-anupam-kher-show-s02/2/383623/the-warrior/383780

[6]'I was lean, dark, shy; nothing like an actor but I dreamt, says Irrfan', ABP News, *Selfie*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eLhye62EHs

[7]*Kuch Bhi Ho Sakta Hai*, Season 2, Episode 5, 30 August 2015, https://www.voot.com/shows/the-anupam-kher-show-s02/2/383623/the-warrior/383780

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

[10]'Its My Life with Irrfan Khan', NDTV, 4 March 2012, https://www.ndtv.com/video/shows/it-s-my-life/it-s-my-life-with-irrfan-khan-225484

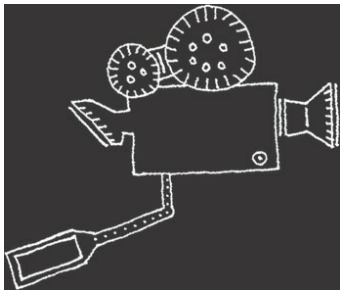
[11]'I was lean, dark, shy; nothing like an actor but I dreamt, says Irrfan', ABP News, *Selfie*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eLhye62EHs

[12]Divya Unny, 'Irrfan Khan International', *Open*, 7 October 2015, https://openthemagazine.com/art-culture/irrfan-khan-international/

[13]'Irrfan Khan in Salaam Bombay', That's True World, 5 October 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8GPnm73CEw&t=2s

2

STAR OF THE SCREENS, BIG AND SMALL



I am constantly looking for newer, compelling stories, so I don't repeat myself.[14]

When Irrfan Khan arrived in Bombay, he did what most struggling new actors would do in the big city. He called on some of the contacts he had made during the time he was a student at NSD. And one such contact he called on was filmmaker and cinematographer Govind Nihalani who had just delivered his critically successful television mini-series, *Tamas* (1988), based on writer Bhisham Sahni's novel.

After *Tamas*, Govind was thinking of doing something on a smaller scale. Since the show had played on Doordarshan, Govind approached Bhaskar Ghosh, the channel's director general, with the suggestion of doing three intimate plays—written by European playwrights.

So that is how Govind Nihalani directed Henrik Ibsen's *Little Eyolf* (*Jazeere*, 1991), August Strindberg's *The Father* (*Pita*, 1991) and Federico Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* (*Rukmavati Ki Haveli*, 1991). He did not change or edit the text, except that the teleplays were performed in Hindi. The settings were changed since the plays' characters were now based in India. And he cast Irrfan Khan in the first two productions.

In the late 1980s, Govind was invited by his friend Ram Gopal Bajaj to watch an NSD rehearsal of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*. And he saw Irrfan perform in the play.

'I was impressed by Irrfan,' Govind says. 'As an actor (even though he was still a student), he engaged his co-actor.' Govind adds that there are many actors who follow the method of not looking at the other actor in the scene, but, instead, they look in other directions, with the hope of getting much more attention. Irrfan would look at his co-actor.

Govind was also impressed by Irrfan's speech. It was unique, a style of his own, and he did not seem to be imitating anyone. Naturally this was towards the end of the NSD days and Irrfan had stepped out of the Naseeruddin Shah-inspired phase of acting. Govind feels that there are actors out there who need to show off their acting skills, but that quality was not

there in Irrfan.

'*Mehnat toh kar rahe hote hain, lekin agar woh mehnat dikh jaye, phir audience ka maza nikal jaata hai* (They are working hard, but if the audience sees that hard work, then they lose the fun of it.). They can tell the actor is acting.' But Irrfan stood apart from those actors, as his performance seemed effortless. '*Hindi mein bolte hain sehajata se acting karna* (They say in Hindi, it is acting with natural ease),' Govind says.

'He was eager to work, but his intention was that it had to be something substantial,' Govind says. '*Chhota bhi role ho, par usmein kuch hona chahiye* (Even if it is a small role, there should be some substance in it.).'

Irrfan's co-stars in *Jazeere* were Ratna Pathak Shah (who married Naseeruddin Shah in 1982) and Mita Vashisht.

Naseeruddin Shah remembers the first time he met Irrfan, when the young actor had dropped by his home to rehearse with Ratna. 'When I saw *Jazeere*, I didn't like the film and I didn't understand it,' he says. 'But I was very impressed with the gravity Irrfan brought to the part and the sense he made of the speech. I thought he was a rare actor who did not emphasize on all the emphatic words, which a lot of actors do. I realized this guy knows his craft.'

There was also one day when Naseeruddin Shah dropped by at Rajkamal Studios to watch the shoot. 'Naseer Saab liked my performance,' Irrfan said in a conversation with the senior actor organized by *India Today*.[15] Irrfan said he thought there was a lot of planning that went into the performances in the teleplay and it lacked the spontaneity he would have preferred. And he turned to Naseeruddin Shah and said, '*Aapko* Jazeere *ki performance achhi lagti hai. Mujhe kabhi nahi lagti* (You liked my performance in *Jazeere.* I never liked it).'

'I remember being confused,' Ratna says, recalling her experience of working on *Jazeere*, one of her earliest big projects, even though she had graduated from NSD in 1981. They rehearsed a lot before the shoot, but she remembers Irrfan was 'put off' by the way the project was going. 'It was never clear what Govind was hoping for, how we should behave. Should we behave real, in what we are saying to each other in the film? Or is a somewhat stagey kind of dramatic acting required? I hate that kind of acting on stage, so why would I do that kind of acting in a film? But I didn't have enough experience at that time to ask questions.'

Despite his disappointment with *Jazeere*, Irrfan agreed to take the

supporting role in Govind Nihalani's next film, *Drishti*, also made in 1990. Inspired by Ingmar Bergman's classic film, *Scenes from a Marriage*, *Drishti* was Govind's take on an Indian marriage gone wrong.

Dimple Kapadia and Shekhar Kapur were cast as the couple Sandhya and Nikhil. Irrfan's NSD classmate Mita Vashisht played Prabha, a close friend of Sandhya, who herself is going through a troubled marriage. Irrfan was cast as Rahul, the nephew of a friend of Sandhya and Nikhil who unexpectedly comes to their wedding anniversary party.

There is a certain shy, quiet quality to Irrfan's Rahul. He's a musician and comes to the party wearing a kurta, while all other men are dressed in trousers and shirts. There is an instant connection between Sandhya and Rahul, even though it is clear they have an age gap (Dimple herself was 33 at the time of the making of the film, while Irrfan was 23). Early small talk makes them realize they are being trained by the same guru.

Later, at the party, Rahul catches Sandhya crying alone in her room. Irrfan, in a most caring manner, says to Dimple's Sandhya, '*Mat royiye. Aap par rona achha nahi lagta. Bahut khoobsurat lagti hain jab aap khush hoti hain. Please mat roiye* (Don't cry. Crying does not suit you. You look very pretty when you are happy. So please don't cry).' In another scene, after Dimple and Irrfan's characters are in a relationship, she talks to Mita Vashisht about her young lover. And she refers to Irrfan's character's eyes as similar to those of a newborn calf.

A few scenes later Sandhya and Rahul make love with Kishori Amonkar's song (she composed the music for the film) 'Meha Jhar Jhar Barsat Re' playing in the backdrop. Outside, it is raining hard. Irrfan is gentle and delicate with the troubled Dimple who is suddenly swept away by this young man's attention. He kisses her cheeks, her neck and plays with her hair as flashes of lightning reflects light on their faces. This was one of the few times Irrfan performed a sex scene in a film. He has talked about how it would always make him feel uncomfortable. But there are three other films in which he agreed to do sex scenes—*Road to Ladakh* (2003), *Rog* (2005) and *The Namesake* (2006).

Another rare thing for Irrfan—in *Drishti*, he sings (rather lip syncs) a song holding a tanpura; 'Bajat Ghan Mridung', in the voice of Pt Raghunandan Panshikar, who was Kishori Amonkar's disciple. His mind and his body sway with the rhythm of the song. Filmmakers never really saw Irrfan as a romantic actor who would lip sync love songs. And he himself was

not comfortable playing the obvious Hindi film-type romantic characters. That is the reason why he decided to take part in the spoof *Every Bollywood Party Song*[16] for the comedy group All India Bakchod in 2015.

In 1990, Irrfan Khan played a bigger supporting role in Bengali maestro Tapan Sinha's *Ek Doctor Ki Maut (EDKM)*. Winner of three National Film Awards (for best director, best second feature film and a special jury mention for the lead actor Pankaj Kapur, *EDKM* was inspired by the true story of a doctor whose research created envy and jealousy among his peers and seniors. The film focuses on an immensely dedicated medical research professional, Dr Dipankar Roy (played by Pankaj Kapur), who finds a cure for leprosy, but at the cost of his personal life. In the story, his findings are ridiculed by his superiors, and he is not permitted to travel abroad to make a presentation at a conference.

Irrfan played Amulya, an enthusiastic journalist whose report first brings attention to Dr Roy's findings. Shabana Azmi played the doctor's lonely wife, Seema. It is a substantial role for Irrfan. He appears in a number of scenes with Pankaj and Shabana as he slowly starts to see the wrong that has been done to the doctor. Irrfan had that young, tall, lanky look that stayed with him through the 1990s, until he started to fill up for bigger film roles.

As an aside, it is worth noting that this would be Irrfan's only film with Shabana (although they really do not have any meaty scenes together in *EDKM*) until Sanjay Gupta's loud 2015 thriller, *Jazbaa*. It is strange that despite the two being among India's finest actors, no other director thought of casting them in the same film, even when there is a 16-year age gap between the two.

Towards the end of the 1990s, Irrfan worked on two film projects that featured his idol, Naseeruddin Shah. There was actor-director Rajat Kapoor's first feature, *Private Detective: Two Plus Two Plus One* (1997). The film was a convoluted story of two couples, an extramarital affair, a snooping private detective played by Naseer and a murder. Irrfan had a very small role as a cop investigating the murder. Sadly, he and Naseer had no scenes together. Irrfan had a few key dialogues and he appeared very confident and natural in the setting. With the clean-shaven, short-haired look of a Bombay cop, he looked young, even though by 1997 he was already 30. 'He was startlingly good in the film,' Naseeruddin Shah says. The film itself was quite forgettable and Rajat Kapoor's near-masterpieces, *Mithya*, *Mixed Doubles* and *Ankhon Dekhi*, would be made in the next century. But he would not cast Irrfan again.

Then there was a blink-and-you-will-miss-Irrfan Khan role in Canadian-Icelandic director Sturla Gunnarsson's *Such a Long Journey* (1998), based on Rohinton Mistry's 1991 novel of the same name and a script by Sooni Taraporevala. Irrfan is listed in the film's credits as young Gustad Noble's (Roshan Seth plays the adult Gustad) father. Irrfan barely appears in two scenes, in the background, out of focus. It would be easy to miss him unless one was specifically looking for Irrfan in the film. On paper, a film with an excellent supporting cast including Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri and Pearl Padamsee must have seemed like an interesting project. And maybe the role was longer. But there was really nothing for Irrfan in the film. It is also worth noting that Irrfan was not the thespian that he is now. And so he would take anything that would come his way. One can only assume that he was at least paid decently, since the film was a Canadian production.

A Decade of Learning

Apart from a few films, Irrfan spent much of the 1990s doing one television show after another. It kept him busy and paid his bills, although he remained largely unhappy. His heart was in films and they were just not coming his way. He would occasionally hear that a particular filmmaker had inquired about him. Like the time someone told him that Subhash Ghai had seen him on a television show. And that he had asked, '*Yeh ladka kaun hai serial mein* (Who is this boy in the serial)?' Saying this to Naseeruddin Shah, he added, 'I used to wait for him (Subhash Ghai) to call me someday. It never happened.'[17]

Television work was repetitive, but at least it provided employment. Speaking during an interview with British-Indian filmmaker Asif Kapadia, televised by the British Film Institute (BFI), Irrfan said that he was bored with television. 'It was tough to retain my interest in acting,'[18] he said.

In an industry where few would take risks, if an actor did something good on a television show, then people would make him repeat it. 'They would write similar scenes for you to perform every week,' Irrfan told the show *Selfie.*

In another interview, talking to Lakshmi Pratury, founder of INKtalks, Irrfan said television shows in India tended to be verbal dramas where actors had to state what was going on in their head or how they were thinking. There was nothing left for the viewers to imagine or interpret. 'It was very literal; everything had to be spoken and verbalized,' he said. 'A housewife could be in the kitchen, but if the television was on in the living room, she could follow what was going on. She didn't need to look at it.'[19]

Sometimes while shooting for a television show he would bring in his theatre training, with pauses between words or sentences. But then some producers would get mad at him and he would hear them say, '*Arre yaar*, this guy is here, now he will make the scene longer,' he said.[20] 'They just wanted me to blurt out lines as fast as I could and they could save money on editing.' Any suggestion by Irrfan to make his character look or behave differently would be discouraged. 'Because everything cost money,' he added.

There were other challenges as well. The transition from theatre to television was not smooth, since the new medium asked for different acting skills from actors. For instance, in theatre, Irrfan was used to looking wherever his mind took him. But television required actors to be very precise in their movements. While working on the show *Bharat Ek Khoj*, Irrfan experienced the wrath of master cinematographer V.K. Murthy (he had shot practically all of Guru Dutt's films). Irrfan had not been trained where to look, as far as the camera was concerned. 'I would look slightly away from the camera and it would affect the lighting,' he told *Selfie*. 'Murthy sahib scolded me, "*Kahan dekhte ho? Kya hai wahan*? *Chalo, focus here* (Where are you looking? What is there to look at? Come on, focus here). Action!"'

Irrfan's habit of surprising cinematographers continued even till recent times. Years after he had worked with V.K. Murthy, he acted in two films (*Madaari*, 2016 and *Karwaan*, 2018) shot by a young FTII-trained cinematographer, Avinash Arun. Avinash also directed the National Film Award-winning Marathi film *Killa* (2014). Reflecting on the challenges of capturing Irrfan on camera and his fluid body movements in films, Avinash says, 'Irrfan Khan is one actor who cannot be given marks. You can't restrict him. You never know how he will move or what he will do in each take.'

Tigmanshu Dhulia arrived in Bombay in 1993 and immediately started working with a new channel, BITV, run by *Business India*. Shekhar Kapur was the creative head of the group. Because of their recent collaboration on *Bandit Queen* (1994), Shekhar asked Tishu to direct a show called *Hum*

Bambai Nahi Jayenge (1994–95). All major actors who had recently arrived from Delhi were on the show, including Irrfan Khan, Manoj Bajpayee, Saurabh Shukla, Vijay Raaz and Kannan Iyer. They shot eight episodes, but the channel shut down. Irrfan was back in the market, looking for work.

It was during these days that Irrfan's path crossed with other leading film personalities of today. In 1995–96, he acted in a series called *Darr*, along with K.K. Menon. The series was directed by Abhinav Kashyap and written by his older brother Anurag Kashyap.

Later, he also acted in a couple of episodes of Gulzar's television show, *Kirdaar* (1993–95). Each episode of the show was a different story, but with Om Puri always playing the protagonist. In 'Hisaab Kitaab', Irrfan portrays the role of Om's son. In another episode named 'Khuda Hafiz', Irrfan and Om play two characters who are hiding during a communal riot—one inside a garbage bin and another outside. But we do not know who is Hindu and who is Muslim. Both episodes were based on Gulzar's own stories. Although his voice sounded young, as a trained actor, Irrfan was confident and comfortable performing opposite a seasoned thespian like Om Puri. Gulzar's daughter Meghna recalls meeting Irrfan for the first time during the making of one of the *Kirdaar* episodes. His acting skills impressed Meghna, and, in 2015, she cast Irrfan as the lead in *Talvar*, her brilliant take on the Aarushi Talwar and Hemraj Banjade murder case.

There were also a couple of television shows in the 1990s that brought Irrfan fame and some degree of satisfaction. The first was a fantasy television show, *Chandrakanta*, originally broadcast on Sundays on Doordarshan during 1994–96. Partly based on Devaki Nandan Khatri's novel of the same name, the show was created by Nirja Guleri. Irrfan was reluctant to act in the show and had to be convinced by his actor friend, Shahbaz Khan, who played the protagonist. Irrfan eventually played the role of the twin brothers, Badrinath and Somnath.

With loud soaring music and dishoom-dishoom sounds during fight sequences, *Chandrakanta* had all the qualities of a B-grade commercial Hindi film. There were battle scenes, men on horses, romance, betrayal, characters morphing into animals and eventually, good winning over evil. One of the first television shows with special effects, *Chandrakanta* was suddenly pulled off the air because of a lawsuit, much to the disappointment of its loyal followers, especially kids and teenagers. Irrfan looks strange in the reruns of the show wearing battle fatigue and eye makeup. But the show's two-year run

helped the actor survive the Bombay rat race.

The other show *Banegi Apni Baat* was created by the husband-and-wife production team, Tony and Diya Singh, for Zee TV. Sutapa was brought in as the writer of the show. Inspired by US television shows with stories about college students, their romances, aspirations and family lives, *Banegi Apni Baat* became rather popular, especially with a younger audience, and it ran for four years, 1993–97. In a recent article, writer Vivek Tejuja had this to say about the show: '*Banegi Apni Baat* also introduced us to the idea of making out, to sex, to topics that were once taboo, but not anymore. Our world was rapidly changing.'[21]

Irrfan Khan played the role of a middle-aged father with a couple of college-going sons. With reading glasses, a touch of gray in his hair and a moustache, Irrfan was aged for the role. He was only 26 at that time.

According to Diya Singh, Sutapa was initially reluctant to bring her husband on the show. But the hesitation vanished when Irrfan auditioned for it. The show had a large ensemble cast, including Surekha Sikri, a renowned NSD graduate (class of 1968). And *Banegi Apni Baat* also introduced a future Hindi and Tamil film star—Jamshedpur-born R. Madhavan.

In post-liberalization India, with likeable characters, who dressed and behaved like regular city-bred folks, *Banegi Apni Baat* hit all the right notes for a popular television series, as opposed to the regressive saas-bahu dramas popularized by Balaji Telefilms, the production house run by Ekta Kapoor. *Banegi Apni Baat* was also a soap opera, but largely close to reality. Despite his discomfort with television shows, Irrfan felt that he was his happiest doing this show. His friend Varun Gautam thinks differently. 'He has never been happy with any of his performances,' Varun says about Irrfan, adding that perhaps he was finally satisfied after he got a chance to act in *Maqbool* (2003), *The Namesake* (2006) and *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012).

In the 1990s, Shailja Kejriwal was already working for television when she got a chance to pitch a show to Star cable channel. Each episode of the show, *Star Bestsellers*, would be 45–50-minutes long and based on a well-known short story. And she lined up what now appears to be an impressive list of

directors for the show—Tigmanshu Dhulia, Anurag Kashyap, Imtiaz Ali, Sriram Raghavan and even Rajkumar Hirani. In fact, Tigmanshu directed six episodes, more than anyone else, and Irrfan acted in a couple of them, including ‘Ek Shaam Ki Mulakaat’ (with Tisca Chopra) and ‘Fursat Mein’ (with Bhumika Chawla). The NSD friendship had made Tishu and Irrfan inseparable. ‘We would be together all the time in those days, before he got busy like now,’ Tishu says.

One day Sutapa went to see Shailja to pitch an episode for *Star Bestsellers*. The two knew about each other but had not really connected, either professionally or personally. Sutapa was accompanied by Tigmanshu who wanted to direct an episode she had written—a spoof on the hit Rajshri Productions film *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999). Sutapa’s episode was called *Hum Saath Saath Hain Kya*? Shailja remembers laughing a lot with her guests.

Sometime later Sutapa took her husband to meet Shailja. Irrfan had already acted in some of the *Star Bestsellers* episodes, but he had not officially met the show’s creator. During the conversation Shailja convinced Irrfan to direct the episode called ‘Alvida’. Sutapa wrote that episode as well. The episode was broadcast in March 2000 and Irrfan cast Sadiya Siddiqui, a young actress he knew from *Banegi Apni Baat*, as the female lead for the show. For the male lead he selected a recent NSD graduate, Nawazuddin Siddiqui (class of 1996). Nawaz was seven years younger to Irrfan. After years of struggle, Nawaz would also become a well-known actor and a star in Hindi cinema. The two NSD graduates would act in a few films together—including a short, *The Bypass* (2003), and then *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012), *New York* (2009) and the international hit feature *The Lunchbox* (2013).

Experiencing the Spell of a Story

In the late 1990s, Asif Kapadia, the youngest son of a Gujarati Muslim immigrant family in London, was doing his masters at the Royal College of Art when he made a trip to India. He was looking for collaborators for his student film, and it landed him in Pune at the FTII. There he met an FTII

student, Amit Kumar. The two hit it off and started to collaborate on each other's films—Asif's student film *The Sheep Thief* (1997), his first feature *The Warrior* (2001) and also Amit's first short, *The Bypass* (2003).

The only casting person Asif knew in India was Tigmanshu Dhulia, who had got the casting director credit for *Bandit Queen* (1994). Although Tishu had been more of an assistant director on *Bandit Queen*, he did help with the casting process, and he convinced director Shekhar Kapur to give him the casting director credit. He hoped that it would get him noticed by foreign production companies that wanted to make films in India. And it did happen when Asif Kapadia decided to make *The Warrior*, setting it in Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh.

Asif co-wrote the film with Tim Miller, who was his professor at the Royal College of Art. The two took a Japanese folk tale about a samurai and his young son who lies to save his father's life. The samurai has decided to shun violence, and for that, he is hunted by his former colleagues. But Asif and Tim decided to set the film in an ancient time in India. With gorgeous cinematography by Roman Osin (*Pride and Prejudice*, 2005 and *Labyrinth of Lies*, 2014), and vast sweeping shots of the desert and the mountains, the 87-minute-long *The Warrior* is a quiet yet gripping and very engaging film. It has a haunting score by Dario Marianelli (Oscar winner for *Atonement*, 2007) and a stunning performance by Irrfan Khan in the lead—Lafcadia, the warrior. Irrfan had waited for over a decade to get an opportunity such as this.

While promoting the film, Asif said about his lead actor, 'Irrfan has a tremendous screen presence and his character had very little dialogue. I felt that he could communicate his emotions without speaking!'[22]

I spoke to Asif Kapadia in 2005 when *The Warrior* opened in the US. He recalled Irrfan's phase of being disillusioned with acting. 'In a way I am glad I didn't see his television work, because I would have been prejudiced, because he was being typecast,' Asif said. 'When I met him he was the sweetest guy and he has this presence, and his eyes, and the way he carries himself…'

But Asif Kapadia required a lot of convincing. According to Tigmanshu Dhulia, Irrfan went through three or four auditions. Initially Asif was not agreeable, but Tishu emphasized that Irrfan was the only possible actor in his age group who could play the role. 'As a casting director I introduced him to every potential actor,' he says. 'Even (late) Nirmal Pandey auditioned.

Eventually he (Asif) was convinced.'

Initially Irrfan was also a little unsure about the film, until Asif narrated a scene to him, and his curiosity was piqued. From then on until he was finally cast, he kept bothering Tishu and even Amit Kumar, constantly asking them if he was going to get the part.

Irrfan would later say that one of the things that troubled him about television was that he would shoot for a few hours and then move on. The best thing about working on *The Warrior* was that he could live that part for a longer period of time. 'I did the shooting for two and a half months,' he said at the INKtalk session.[23] 'It was the first time I experienced the spell of a story—what a story can do to an actor, how it grows on you when you are continuously shooting…or when you are continuously dealing with that character… And it becomes a part of your experience. It becomes real for you.'

With sparse dialogues, *The Warrior* has beautiful moments of silence. Much of those scenes are filled with Dario Marianelli's score, at times breaking into soaring operatic music, the kind of experience one would get from watching *Lawrence of Arabia* with Maurice Jarre's composition.

The film opens with a long shot of a tree in the desert and a sole warrior practising martial arts in slow motion. The powerful opening shot sets the mood for the rest of the film. By now Irrfan had done some film work and a lot of television. But this would be the first time that a filmmaker would use Irrfan's deep, mysterious, somewhat sad-looking eyes. Immediately after the credits roll, the screen is filled up with Irrfan's intense hooded eyes, as he watches his son practising martial arts. And for a while we just see his eyes, not his full face.

There are many such moments, when the camera stays on Lafcadia's face, lovingly observing the man with long hair, a beard and haggard looks, showing the pain of the sins he has committed, and now is trying to flee, hoping the ghosts of his past will not catch up with him.

The Warrior is a small masterpiece. It won two BAFTAs (for the Best British Film and the Most Promising Newcomer filmmaker). The film's tagline was 'Anthony Minghella Presents…' The late British director loved the film and decided to lend it his name, hoping it would help its theatrical release. Anthony was also responsible for convincing Harvey and Bob Weinstein of Miramax to release the film in the US with its original Hindi track. The Weinstein brothers had a successful record of guiding American

indie and foreign language films through the box office and the Oscar process—films such as *Shakespeare in Love* and the Italian tragi-comedy, *Life Is Beautiful*.

Quite by chance, they acquired a Hindi-language (*The Warrior*) film for the US market and they seemed clueless about how to take it further. At one point they even considered dubbing it in English. 'I said it should be released in Hindi and in its appropriate sound, given it is a fable and the fable works because you are travelling on a magic carpet to a foreign landscape—a very particular landscape,' the late Anthony Minghella told me in 2005 (he died three years later) at the time of the film's release in the US. 'Hearing English voices in that landscape, to me, would not be the most appropriate way to experience a beautiful and distinctive movie.'

The Weinstein brothers released the film in the US in a limited run in art-house theatres in select cities. But they really did not use any of their muscle power to push it. *The Warrior* collapsed in the US market. The film had cost $4.5 million, but it only made approximately $50,000 in the US and another $286,000 in the foreign markets.

Reviews of *The Warrior* were very positive. Irrfan Khan was noticed by a couple of critics. Writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Mick LaSalle said, 'Actor Khan is a rugged man with sad eyes. His eyes, in fact, are not unlike Terrence Howard's in *Hustle & Flow*,[24] those of a potentially decent man who knows he's living an indecent life.' *The Boston Globe*'s Janice Page wrote, 'As one of the few professional actors in this cast, Khan probably knew the burden of a minimalist script going in. His quiet performance carries the film, and his puffy, world-weary eyes haunt every frame, even after the camera's focus drifts heavenward to let the end credits roll.'[25]

But the big break Irrfan had hoped for, sadly, did not do wonders for him. In fact, *The Warrior* did not even get a theatrical release in India. But Irrfan still values that experience. Some doors did open for him after *The Warrior*.

'This film showed me a path and I just followed it,' he said in the INKtalks interview. 'My life changed after that.'

And Irrfan was fortunate that the world around him—the Indian film industry—was also finally changing.

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[14]Divya Unny, 'I Am Never Good Enough for Myself', *Open*, 6 December 2017,

https://openthemagazine.com/cinema/i-am-never-good-enough-for-myself/

[15]'Naseeruddin Shah and Irrfan Khan in Conversation', *India Today*, 10 December 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvjLyUU6FG0

[16]'AIB: Every Bollywood Party Song Feat, Irrfan', All India Bakchod, 2 August 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3nhttUMhrI&t=192s

[17]'Naseeruddin Shah and Irrfan Khan in Conversation', *India Today*, 10 December 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvjLyUU6FG0

[18]'Bollywood star Irrfan Khan discusses his career', British Film Institute, 11 August 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7anr2OKnAQ

[19]'Irrfan Khan: Spell of the Story', INKtalks, 23 October 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NX7eVqZlAd0

[20]Ibid.

[21]'Revisiting 90s Prime Time TV', *Verve*, 7 March 2019, http://www.vervemagazine.in/arts-and-culture/revisiting-90s-prime-time-tv

[22]'Will the Warrior Win?', *The Hindu*, 6 December 2002, https://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/fr/2002/12/06/stories/2002120600950300.htm

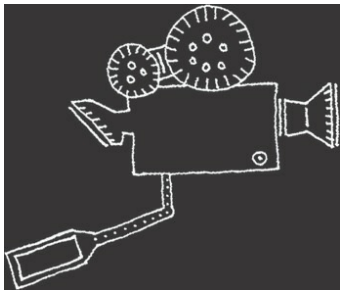
[23]'Irrfan Khan: Spell of the Story', INKtalks, 23 October 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NX7eVqZlAd0

[24]Mike LaSalle, 'A Good Dad Shields His Son from the Horror of His Work', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 July 2005, https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/A-good-dad-shields-his-son-from-the-horror-of-his-2619796.php

[25]Janice Page, '"The Warrior" Fights the Good Fght', *The Boston Globe*, 29 July 2005, http://archive.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2005/07/29/the_warrior_fights_the_good_fight/

3

THE MAKING OF THE SILENT STAR



I don't draw references from cinema while acting. I draw from how I feel.[26]

By the turn of the new century, Hindi cinema was going through a transformation. The standard formula films with romance, melodrama, comedy, villains and suspense were slowly being rejected. Hrithik Roshan's first film, *Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai* (2000), was a huge hit, but his subsequent films failed at the box office. There was still the Yash Chopra, Karan Johar brand of popular Bollywood cinema, but in the middle of it all, a new breed of filmmakers, writers, along with a large pool of talented and trained actors, was starting to emerge. It helped them that films like *Bandit Queen* (1994) and *Satya* (1998) were made. These were path-breaking films that set the stage for the new indie Indian cinema.

Irrfan Khan has often said that when he graduated from NSD, the parallel or new wave cinema movement of the 1970s and 1980s was more or less dead, barring a few films that he managed to get roles in—like *Drishti* and *Ek Doctor Ki Maut* (both made in 1990). But a decade later, as the new indie cinema started to emerge, Irrfan found himself at the right place. Even the time was finally right for him.

At the time Asif Kapadia was working on *The Warrior* (2001), Tigmanshu Dhulia was also working on the script of his first film, *Haasil* (2003), set in the world of violent student politics in a college in Allahabad. Tishu is from Allahabad and he attended school and college there before he shifted to Delhi to join NSD. At Allahabad University he had the first-hand experience of student politics when he joined the leftist Progressive Students' Organization.

Haasil is the story of a young college student, Aniruddha Sharma, who is drawn to Ranvijay Singh, a student leader with strong criminal inclinations. For the role of Aniruddha, a decent and honest student, Tishu cast Jimmy Sheirgill, who had already made a mark in supporting roles in films like *Maachis* (1996) and *Mohabbatein* (2000). Jimmy would become a muse for Tishu and act in four more films directed by the filmmaker. For the negative

role of Ranvijay, a smooth charmer with a violent streak, he cast his friend Irrfan Khan.

Irrfan would end up getting quite a few negative roles early on in his career. But it did not seem to bother him. For one, he had waited so long to get work in films that he was ready to accept just about any solid role that came his way. Tigmanshu Dhulia has another observation: ‘It wasn’t like he wanted a main role of a hero and sing songs and romance on the screen. I guess everyone has that desire from within, but that was not his drive—to become a dancing hero.’

Haasil, however, took a while to finance. For quite some time Tishu did not have a producer on board. His script ended with a shootout at the Kumbh Mela. And while the team was desperately searching for money, the Kumbh Mela started. It was a question of shooting the finale then or waiting for a year. So, Tishu, Irrfan, Jimmy and some other key members of the film team pooled in their money. They went to the location and shot the final action sequence. They still did not know when the rest of the financing would come through.

Haasil ran into other problems as well. Everyone was tense as the film schedule kept changing. When Tishu finally arrived in Allahabad, he was excited about bringing a team with him, thinking he was going to shoot in his city. ‘But soon I landed in trouble,’ he says. ‘I had to shoot in the university and people started saying I was showing Allahabad in a bad light. So I agreed that I would not mention the city’s name. The name Allahabad is not mentioned in the film. It had really become a major problem for us.’

On his part, Irrfan had his heart set on giving his best to his friend’s first film. Tishu took him to Allahabad and then he left him there. ‘He started hanging out with my friends, and in 10 days, he got their accent, their body language,’ Tishu says. ‘In Hindi films, people often say that they have researched or prepared a lot for a role. But I know no one does anything. Irrfan put his blood and sweat to get the tone and the accent right in a film like *Haasil*.’

Haasil opens with one of the best action sequences in a Hindi film. As the credits roll, Irrfan is chased in the college hallway by the rival gang’s members. The opening scene sets the mood for the rest of the film. But despite the violence, there are some real warm scenes in the film.

There is one particular scene and its backstory that deserves mention. In the early part of the film when Jimmy’s Aniruddha informs Irrfan’s Ranvijay

that he is in love with a woman, Ranvijay asks, '*Sex-vex ho gaya kya* (Have you had sex with her)?' Aniruddha, shy at first, replies, '*Main usse dil se pyar karta hoon. Koi buri nazar se nahi dekhta hoon* (I love her from my heart. I do not look at her with bad intentions).'

Tigmanshu managed to get Irrfan to improvise a dialogue after this. Responding to Aniruddha, Ranvijay says, '*Wahi to, yaar, nazar ka hee to khel hai sab, saala dil to hamara bhi varna saaf hai. Bhagwaan ne hamein aisee ankhein de dee hain, kya karein* (That is the thing, my friend. It is the game of eyes and intentions; otherwise even my heart is clear. What to do? God has given me eyes like this)?' Then he hits his right eye with his hand.

'Irrfan has these bags under his eyes,' Tishu says. 'They are natural, since he has had them since birth. They used to be very prominent in those days, so I thought I should use them in a dialogue.'

It is a delicate scene between two men—one, a mentor (Ranvijay), and the other, the mentee (Aniruddha). They sit on a wall, with the beautiful late afternoon light falling on them. And the Ganga is flowing behind them. It is hard to believe that Ranvijay, the mentor, would eventually become so evil.

The scene came out really well, but Irrfan was initially not in a good mood during the shoot. It was his day off. Tishu was shooting another scene and suddenly he noticed this location where one sees Irrfan and Jimmy sitting and talking. The director thought it would be a perfect location for the scene. He asked one of his assistant directors to quickly call Irrfan. Irrfan was resting in his hotel. He came to the set, and naturally he was slightly angry. '*Yeh kya matlab hai, yaar*?' he said to Tishu. '*Aap kabhi bhi bula lete ho. Aise thode na hoga yeh sab* (What does this mean? You call me whenever you want to. This is not how things will happen).'

Tishu apologized. 'I said, "*Irrfan, yaar, main bhaag bhaag kar directing kar sakta hoon, tu bhaag bhaag kar* acting *nahi kar sakta* (Look, Irrfan, I can run around and direct the film, so can't you run around and act as well)?"' Being a professional, Irrfan quickly sat down to do the scene. Tigmanshu had also put slight pressure on him since it was late afternoon and the light was about to change.

Haasil was a critical success and Irrfan's performance was appreciated during the awards season. He won the Best Actor in a Villainous Role from *Filmfare*, and *Screen Weekly* recognized him in the Best Performance in a Negative Role category. About Irrfan's performance, Rediff.com's critic wrote, 'Irrfan Khan as the ambitious, brash, fearless goon is mind-blowing.

He is outright scary and makes you sit up, wondering what he'll do next.'[27]

Irrfan Khan had finally arrived.

Born to Be Maqbool

After the moderate success of *Makdee* (2002), a children's film, with Shabana Azmi playing a witch, Vishal Bhardwaj wanted to make a gangster film set in Bombay. He was searching for the story, and quite by chance, on a train ride from Dehradun to Delhi with his godson, Vishal asked the kid if he had anything to read. The kid handed Vishal *Tales from Shakespeare* by Charles and Mary Lamb. The book contained 20 stories, adapted from William Shakespeare's plays. Vishal had not read or heard any of Shakespeare's plays.

'The first story I read was *Macbeth*,' Vishal told Seema Chisti at the Express Adda in Delhi.[28] 'And it was so good. *Mere hosh udd gaye*. *Ki yeh kis tarah ki kahaani hai* (I lost my sense of being. What kind of a story was this)?' Until then Vishal thought literature was boring. In fact, while promoting *Maqbool*, he admitted that he was not acquainted with English literature at all.

Macbeth's plot intrigued Vishal so much that he then got the play, read it again, and asked his *Makdee* co-writer Abbas Tyrewala to write a screenplay, transforming *Macbeth* into *Maqbool*. Shakespeare's Scottish countryside transitioned into the inner city of Bombay from where a Don Corleone-like underworld king Jahangir Khan, aka Abbaji (Pankaj Kapur), rules his empire of illegal businesses and interests in the city's Hindi film industry. He is well-served by his trusted lieutenant Maqbool (Irrfan Khan) who is having an affair with his boss's mistress Nimmi (Tabu playing the character of Lady Macbeth). Vishal would later say that he was always fascinated by love triangles and the complications that arose from those plotlines, and so he decided his Lady Macbeth and Macbeth would not be married.

Initially, Vishal Bhardwaj offered Maqbool's role to Kay Kay Menon, but he turned it down for a war drama with Amitabh Bachchan—*Deewaar: Let's Bring Our Heroes Home* (2004). That film vanished, and surely Kay

Kay must have regretted his decision. Unclear about whom to cast as Maqbool, Vishal even talked to Kamal Haasan for that role. Naseeruddin Shah was already supposed to play one of the characters in the film. So Vishal told Naseer that he had talked to Kamal for the role of Maqbool. Naseer was livid. 'I said, "Look, if you are talking to him, then I am out," he says.

After much thinking, Vishal decided to take a risk with Irrfan Khan, having seen him perform in *Haasil*. Irrfan would be the youngest NSD graduate in the cast, including other alumni—Naseer, Om Puri, Pankaj Kapur and Piyush Mishra. In fact, towards the beginning of the film, there is a scene where all these actors are sitting in Abbaji's living room. Irrfan was the juniormost of all, but now his time had finally come. He sat in the midst of all the senior actors with the confidence of a veteran.

'That was a masterstroke,' Naseer says about Irrfan's casting. Before the shoot started, Naseer was offered Abbaji's role, but he refused, since he felt he had played characters like that before. And then Vishal came up with the remarkable idea of casting Naseer and Om as two bumbling cops, always drawing up horoscopes of the film's main characters. The two inspectors—Purohit and Pandit—become the crucial three witches of the story.

Maqbool is a complex film with themes of loyalty, betrayal and guilt. Irrfan seemed concerned, as it was the first time he was doing a love story, and even then, it was not the conventional depiction of romance as one would see in most Hindi films. It helped that Vishal arranged a two-week workshop. 'We all read out our parts,' Irrfan said in an interview.[29] '(That helped) develop a bond between all the characters, and the comfort level appears on screen.' He added that Tabu also interacted with him, which surely helped him in shedding his inhibitions.

Irrfan could have gone into a lot of detail in defining Maqbool, but he felt that would have bored the audience. So he developed a method. 'I emphasized on some broad sentiments, taking a cue from what's going to happen next in the script. For instance, the sense of personal insecurity starts appearing on Maqbool's face the moment Nimmi starts instigating him against his mentor, Abbaji. But definitely, I would not have played Macbeth this way on stage.'

Watching Irrfan in the role, one can only express surprise at the fact that this man had to wait so long to get such an important role. There is something so fresh and raw in his performance. But I also wonder if Irrfan would have

been this compelling if he had acted in films for many years. In a way the hunger of the actor parallels the desperation of Maqbool to take over Abbaji's empire and to introduce Nimmi to the world as his partner. Irrfan was born to play this role.

Irrfan is brilliant in just about every scene in the film. Right towards the beginning, we see Om Puri's Inspector Pandit predict that in six months Maqbool will have Abbaji's seat. There is the initial moment of thrill, and a smile appears on Irrfan's face. After all, this is Maqbool's true ambition. But Irrfan does not allow Maqbool to rejoice at that declaration for too long. In an instant, Irrfan's face shows a change in his mood and he yells at the inspector, threatening to cut off his tongue.

There are many such special moments throughout the film—when Abbaji grabs Maqbool's hand and he kisses it as tears appear in his eyes; or the jealousy and insecurity that appear on Maqbool's face when he realizes Nimmi is sleeping with Abbaji one afternoon. And then there is my ultimate Hindi cinema fanboy moment—the 'Tu Mere Ru Ba Ru Hai' qawwali sequence where Tabu's Nimmi is at her seductive best, as she walks to the dargah with Maqbool. All the while we hear the haunting qawwali in Daler Mehndi's voice. The choice of the singer was such a casting coup for Vishal Bhardwaj, who, as usual, was also the music composer of the film.

Naseeruddin Shah remembers some special scenes with Irrfan. Maqbool is responsible for Kaka's (Piyush Mishra playing the Banquo character) death. When Kaka's body is brought into the courtyard, his body is uncovered, and Maqbool imagines that his eyes are open. He is startled as if he has seen a ghost. 'In reaction to that, the way Irrfan fell over backwards, I tried to stop his fall,' Naseer recalls. 'And he said, "*Kya, Naseer bhai*? *Kya kar rahe ho* (What, Naseer bhai? What are you doing)?" I said, "*Tum gir rahe they* (You were falling)." And he went, "*Nahi, nahi* (No, no), I was acting." And I said, "You are bloody good."'

And then, towards the end, Naseer's Inspector Purohit is in jail and Maqbool points a gun at him. 'I remember that scene well,' Naseer says. 'The thing to remember is that he had the upper hand in that scene as a character. But not once did he gloat. Actors can't resist gloating when they have the upper hand in a scene. I noticed Irrfan didn't do that. This guy not only knows his onions but he's a very generous actor as well.'

The Long and ‘Short’ of It

In the early 2000s, as Irrfan’s struggling days continued, he agreed to act in two short films—one, a 48-minute road story—a thriller about a man and a woman travelling through Ladakh, close to the border of India and Pakistan. Directed by the future Oscar-nominated filmmaker, Ashvin Kumar (*The Little Terrorist*, 2004), *Road to Ladakh* (2003) had Irrfan Khan and Koel Purie in the lead in a tale of drugs, crime and sex, and a journey through the mountains. The film was made under such tough circumstances that a documentary on the making of the film called *The Near Un-making of Road to Ladakh* is equally interesting to watch.

Ashvin Kumar first met Irrfan in Chennai, when he was working as an assistant director for a television series called *Cell Three*. Later, Ashvin briefly studied at the London Film School when he saw *The Warrior* in a theatre. Ashvin wrote the screenplay of *Road to Ladakh* with Irrfan in mind. *Haasil* and *Maqbool* had not been released yet. ‘I aggressively pursued him,’ Ashvin says. ‘I had no money at that time, and so I had to convince him to do the job for free. I don’t think he was in a financial condition to do anything for free.’ The film team did pay Irrfan for his expenses to come to the shoot, but there is one shot of him in the documentary where he complains about the quality of the food. When Irrfan read the script, he was interested in the project, and Ashvin even convinced him to go to Delhi for rehearsals. Irrfan’s initial response was that he did not do rehearsals, so Ashvin told him it would be like a theatre workshop. And he planned several theatre-focused games with Irrfan and Koel.

While he was in Delhi for the workshop, Irrfan went out one night to party with his NSD friends, and his scooter overturned. He broke his arm. But Ashvin made the best of the situation where he added Irrfan’s cast on his arm in the plot. Irrfan’s character Shafiq is shown to carry an explosive inside the cast. And towards the end of the film, when Shafiq’s cast is removed, that was a real situation. ‘We had timed the shoot to when the cast actually had to be removed,’ Ashvin says.

When Irrfan arrived in Ladakh, he experienced the worst of altitude sickness, from headaches to dizziness. The living conditions were not perfect

for a film crew. The cast and crew would sleep in sleeping bags in tents. And it rained heavily throughout the shoot, and those were long days of work. ‘It was one disaster after another, but Irrfan was so accommodating,’ Ashvin says.

One of the challenging moments during the shoot was when Koel Purie seemed hesitant to do a sex scene with Irrfan, even though she knew she had to do it. The scene was written in the script from the beginning. Upon Ashvin’s suggestion, Irrfan spent time convincing Koel that the lovemaking scene was essential to the plot, and, in fact, he even appeared naked in the film—the only time he fully undressed before the camera.

‘He wasn’t hesitant at all,’ Ashvin says. ‘I guess he was never asked to undress or strip in any other Indian film. You can’t show nudity in Indian films. I thought he was young, so he could do a scene like that. As he grows older and becomes a star, he will probably be cautious if a role like this is offered to him.’

After the film was completed, Ashvin took it to the Cannes Film Festival’s market section, and Irrfan tagged along. According to Ashvin, this was Irrfan’s first trip abroad. Ashvin paid for the actor’s airfare. Still, the living arrangement was not comfortable, and Irrfan shared a bed with Ashvin.

‘He was very sure of the fact that he was going to come back, and next time he would not share the room with his director,’ Ashvin says. ‘He said to me, “The next time I come back, it will be with a movie, and I will walk on that carpet.” He had a very clear sense of his journey.’

Irrfan also travelled with Ashvin to London. They stayed in Ashvin’s tiny flat and once again they shared the bed. The two would spend nights talking about films and actors. By now Irrfan was a big admirer of Marlon Brando. And Ashvin remembers learning a lot from Irrfan. ‘I learnt from him how to talk to an actor,’ Ashvin says. Early on, Irrfan told Ashvin that it was wrong to tell an actor what to do, to look up or look down. That, to Irrfan, was not acting, since it would only turn the actors into puppets. Irrfan’s big lesson for Ashvin was that a performance happens spontaneously at a particular moment. No amount of rehearsal can bring out that moment. ‘What you can do is to properly fertilize the atmosphere around the actors,’ says Ashvin.

‘Irrfan is like a Zen monk,’ Ashvin adds. ‘It’s the state he wants to be in before he comes on the set. He’s not acting up, performing before the shot. He’s just in a still state of mind. And the minute the camera rolls, he delivers it. The humility with which he approaches his work is pretty awe-inspiring.’

Ashvin also has a lot of admiration for Irrfan taking a leap of faith to work with a first-time filmmaker. Irrfan had not seen a single frame of anything Ashvin had shot, and yet he willingly went along the adventurous road. In fact, even his family—Sutapa, and his first son, Babil, who was a young kid at that time—visited the set in Ladakh.

Around this time, Irrfan also went on another adventure, this time to Rajasthan, although it was for a fewer number of days, on a short film shoot. The 16-minute-long silent film, *The Bypass* (2003), was directed by Amit Kumar, Asif Kapadia's friend and associate director on *The Warrior*. Asif came on board as the producer of the film, and his regular and future Oscar-winning composer Dario Marianelli did the background score.

The Bypass is available on YouTube. And although it was hardly shown in India, the short gained a cult status among young filmmakers in Bombay. Amit was looking for a fresh face to play the lead of a thief in the middle of the desert. The only casting agent Amit knew was Tigmanshu Dhulia who recommended a recent graduate from NSD—Nawazuddin Siddiqui. Amit first watched a VHS tape of a *Star Bestsellers* episode, 'Alvida', which Irrfan had directed, with Nawaz in the lead. And then Amit auditioned Nawaz a number of times. But he thought he was not getting the right tone from the young actor, especially since the film had no dialogues. 'I kept telling Nawaz to do less, and he said, "Amit bhai, everyone in the industry tells me you are from a drama school, so show me something, do something. I understand what you are asking, but I am not able to do it easily,"' Amit recalls. It took two weeks, but then one fine day Nawaz's performance just clicked.

Amit offered Irrfan a smaller role in the film about a corrupt cop. Irrfan had formed a good friendship with Amit during the shoot of *The Warrior*, so he was fine with playing a small role. 'But he was a bit hesitant to play the role, and I found out the reason a bit later,' Amit adds. 'When the film was made, he told me he thought the cop was a very cold and brutal guy. "Now when I see your film I realize the whole universe is cold and brutal and I fit into this landscape," ' he said. Irrfan was on the verge of becoming a well-known actor (*Haasil* and *Maqbool* were made around the same time), but he still agreed to stay in a small hotel with the rest of the cast and crew.

Later, Amit even considered casting Irrfan in his first feature, *Monsoon Shootout* (2013). But by the time the film was about to be shot, Irrfan had to travel to Canada to do additional dialogue replacement (ADR) or dubbing work for Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* (2012), and the role was given to another actor.

The Bypass is also well known for one more reason. The film was shot by Amit's FTII classmate, Rajeev Ravi. Anurag Kashyap was so impressed by Rajeev's work on the short that he hired him as the cinematographer on a number of his films, including *No Smoking* (2007), *That Girl in Yellow Boots* (2010) and *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012). Rajeev would also direct a few films, including the near three-hour gangster epic, *Kammatti Paadam* (2016).

The Bhatt Connection

Irrfan had spent most of his time in the 1990s working on television shows. But all that time he was also meeting people in the Indian film industry—some who became his close associates. One such person was the writer, director and producer, Mahesh Bhatt. A chance meeting at TV writer and director Vinta Nanda's place would lead to Mahesh becoming a friend and a mentor to Irrfan. And while Irrfan was trying to branch out into indie art films like *The Warrior* and *Maqbool*, Mahesh Bhatt and his clan, including his daughter Pooja, would take him in the direction of their brand of popular cinema—often sexually charged crime dramas, inspired, sometimes directly lifted, from Hollywood films. While this connection did not further Irrfan's career as an actor, it did give him a solid ground to stand on in the Hindi film industry.

'He was a quiet man, not very vocal,' Mahesh says as he recalls the first meeting with Irrfan Khan. 'But he had an unusual presence.'

And so the Bhatt family gave Irrfan a few breaks, including a supporting role of a public prosecutor in *Kasoor* (2001), mostly an adaptation of *Jagged Edge* (1985), with a touch of *What Lies Beneath* (2000). The film was directed by Mahesh Bhatt's nephew, Vikram. Irrfan appears in the second half of the film and is an alternate legal force to the attractive defense lawyer played by Indian-Canadian actress Lisa Ray, making her Hindi film debut (alas, she was only cast for her looks and physical appearance, and the filmmakers hired Divya Dutta to dub her voice). 'We needed a counterpoint to the gorgeous lead, Lisa Ray, where there is a lawyer who is completely indifferent to the heroine,' Mahesh Bhatt says about casting Irrfan in *Kasoor*.

Irrfan got so close to the Bhatts that he also agreed to do a cameo in *Footpath* (2003) and play a supporting role in an Emraan Hashmi starrer, *The Killer* (2006).

However, his big break—the first actual lead role in a Hindi film—came with *Rog* (2005), which was produced by Pooja Bhatt. It should be noted that *The Warrior* was a British production and the film never opened in India. 'Irrfan Khan's narrative was kickstarted by the belief Pooja had that he was a very unusual actor,' Mahesh says. In the film Irrfan played the role of Uday Rathore, a depressed, suicidal police inspector assigned to the task of investing a famous model's murder (the attractive South African model Ilene Hamann in what can only be described as a wooden performance). During the investigation, Uday identifies three potential suspects, including Harsh, a celebrated journalist (Suhel Seth in a peculiarly over-the-top performance, with an awful accent). Playing a serious role in *Rog* must have been a challenge for a trained actor like Irrfan, given how many supporting actors hammed their way in the film.

'I still remember that outstanding scene I wrote on the set, where he (Irrfan's Uday) talks to the therapist,' Mahesh says about the day he was on the set to help out Pooja. I wrote the scene where he says, "*Meri ankhein soti hain, magar mera dil hamesha jaga rehta hai* (My eyes sleep, but my heart is always awake)." I remember the way he looked at me and said, "*Kya baat hai, Bhatt saab* (That is excellent, Bhatt saab)!" I said, "*Yeh jumla nahi. Saari zindagi se nikaal kar lani padti hai baat* (This is not just a sentence. One has to live an entire life to bring that out)."

Irrfan had already done lovemaking scenes in *Drishti* and *Road to Ladakh*, but Mahesh and Pooja recall how much they had to coax him to even kiss Ilene Hamann. Irrfan kept wanting to postpone a lovemaking scene. As the day came closer, he would say to Pooja, '*Kal karengey, parson karengey'* (Let's do it tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.).' He was so stressed out that he even got fever the day before the scene was supposed to be shot. Mahesh says, 'I said, "Irrfan, what's wrong with you?" And he asked, "*Kuch storyboard hai* (Is there a storyboard)?" And I said, "*Kya bakwaas kar raha hai yaar* (What nonsense are you talking)?"'

Mahesh remembers when Pooja had to push Irrfan during a corridor shot where the two actors are supposed to make out. 'He was a nervous wreck,' Mahesh says. 'It was not a space he had been in. He had always played a negative role or he played the character of a romantic type of hero, but this

was not your typical Hindi film.'

Eventually Pooja walked into Ilene's makeup room with Irrfan and gave the two of them an ultimatum that either they could knock off the scene quickly or the entire crew would have to stay back the whole night. 'I think—and she was not an actor in that sense—the advantage of working with a woman who was a model from outside the country was that they have a certain degree of comfort level with their bodies,' Pooja says, adding that Ilene made Irrfan feel at ease. The scene was meant to be a tender moment between the two, so she sort of took the lead, while Irrfan, stressed as he was, drank two pegs of rum before that shot. When the first take was done, Pooja thought it had gone well. But Irrfan asked for another one. 'And I asked, "What about the film?"' she says. In those days film stock was expensive. 'So he said, "*Main laoonga ghar se* (I can bring it from home)." Everyone cracked up.'

It is possible that part of Irrfan's concern stemmed from an understanding that Hindi film heroes had to look a certain way—standard good looks, the ability to romance the heroines as Shahrukh Khan did in *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998). And perhaps—as his friend Tigmanshu Dhulia has also suggested—somewhere within him he believed he was not that kind of hero or lead actor material.

'Deep down Irrfan sensed the narrative that one had to be worthy of getting roles that are lead roles,' Mahesh says. 'Pooja looked at him the way the world woke up to him and looked at him later on. He himself was reluctant to look at himself that way. And he had to be cajoled and pushed into doing that role.'

To that Pooja adds that she thinks Irrfan is a very attractive man. There are all sorts of men and actors, but a film industry, like the one in Bombay, tends to pigeonhole what a villain or a hero should look like. 'I was trying to blur those lines,' she says. 'So we needed an actor, not a star who couldn't act.'

But Pooja acknowledges that a part of Irrfan's nervousness may have had to do with the fact that Ilene Hamann is a gorgeous-looking woman. 'I do understand beautiful women can be somewhat intimidating,' she says.

Years later, Irrfan Khan was engaged in a conversation with actress Kangana Ranaut in a *Film Companion* programme called *The Meeting Ground*. The two actors talked about their career choices and their techniques of working. At one point Irrfan quoted Mahesh Bhatt. 'Bhatt saab is a very

intelligent person; he is very aware. He would say, "*Arre Irrfan, gandi acting kar* (Irrfan, do bad acting). Spoonfeed the audience."'[30]

Irrfan had been trained in theatre, and his outlook and desire was to make good artistic cinema. But Mahesh Bhatt also wanted him to get the essence of mass cinema where subtle performances do not necessarily work with the audience.

'I believe it is better to be crude and clear than to be artistic and vague,' Mahesh says. 'Because the constituency we are pitching our narrative to is not an elite, refined, affected audience which is being shaped by a sensibility over years. The dharma of mainstream entertainment is maximum reach. The idiom compels us to be a little shrill. And you have to appeal to that person who is a low-grade moron who is sitting in the last row of your cinema hall. *Usko samajh mein aana chaiye baat* (He has to understand the film).'

Mahesh felt that actors like Irrfan, with their NSD training, often fall into a trap where they seem happy as long as critics, columnists and film festival programmers applaud them. But they do not see the world outside. Mahesh himself started his career with critically acclaimed melodramas such as *Arth* (1982) and *Saaransh* (1984), but he slowly inched towards more popular films. Eventually the Bhatt clan would make crime dramas with a heavily suggestive dose of sex.

Mahesh gives the example of two Tamil actors—Sivaji Ganesan and Kamal Haasan, saying that the two actors represent very different schools of acting. And he adds, 'Sivaji Ganesan said, "It's not that we don't know subtle acting. The place from where we come, we have done street theatre and there we had to make our living on a crowded street by making ourselves heard and our emotions felt by a man who was a vegetable vendor and would be sitting across the street. Soon after the show was over, I would have to go and ask him for my money. If he didn't feel entertained, he wouldn't give me any paisa."'

Irrfan and Mahesh Bhatt also connected over issues that concerned India —the political, religious climate in the country, including the fact that the actor was opposed to the idea of militant Islam.

These were issues that Irrfan would talk about to those close to him, but he rarely expressed his opinions on religion and politics in public.

But around the time of the release of his film *Madaari*, he made a couple of statements that made some Muslim clerics very angry. 'Rather than fasting during Ramzan, people should self-introspect,' he spoke during one of the

promotional events in the month of Ramzan.[31] He said that Muslims had made a mockery of Muharram, as 'animals are being slaughtered in the name of qurbani during Muharram'. Irrfan also criticized Muslims for not speaking against terrorism. Muslim clerics in Irrfan's home state of Rajasthan slammed the actor over the remarks. Maulana Abdul Wahid Khatri, of the state's Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, suggested Irrfan should concentrate on his film career rather than interfering in religious issues.

These issues in particular connected Irrfan with Mahesh Bhatt. But over the years the two friends got busy with their different projects and somewhat drifted apart. After *The Killer* (2006), Irrfan did not act in any of Mahesh Bhatt's productions. But the veteran filmmaker would occasionally attend premieres and advance screenings of Irrfan's films. He remembers attending the screenings of *Life of Pi* (2012) and the recent *Qarib Qarib Singlle* (2017).

In 2014, Mahesh was in Kolkata, staying at The Oberoi Grand. It was his last night in the city and he had an early morning flight to catch. Suddenly he got a call from the lobby. The man on the other side said, '*Sir, main Irrfan bol raha hoon. Aa sakta hoon* (Sir, this is Irrfan. Can I come to your room)?' Mahesh actually did not recognize the voice and tried to get rid of the caller. 'I said, "*Nahi, yaar*, it's late, and I have an early morning flight." But Irrfan insisted and said he would take only 10 minutes. He rang the bell and I saw him standing there. "Tu hai (It is you)!" I remarked. And he said, "*Bhatt saab, mujhe laga ke aapne pechana nahi* (I thought you did not recognize me, Bhatt saab)."'

Irrfan was in Kolkata for the shoot of *Piku* (2015). That meeting went way beyond the 10 minutes that Irrfan had asked for. The two friends had not spoken for a while, and so they talked for a long time. '*Humne baith ke guftagu ki*. *Yahan wahan ki baatein* (We sat and chatted about this and that),' Mahesh Bhatt says.

Getting into the Skin

As Irrfan started getting more work, he also tried to branch out and try different kinds of roles, including exploring his comic skills as an actor.

There are two fascinating films he acted in immediately after his initial films —*Haasil*, *Maqbool* and *Rog*. The first, *Dubai Return* (2005), never had a theatrical release in India, although it did travel to a few film festivals; and the second, a Hindi-language film with a large ensemble cast, *Life in a… Metro* (2007), which had a healthy success at the box office.

Dubai Return was directed by Aditya Bhattacharya, who belongs to Hindi cinema's royalty; his maternal grandfather was Bimal Roy and his father was director Basu Bhattacharya. Aditya introduced Aamir Khan in his first film, *Raakh* (1989)—a childhood friendship in Bandra materializing in a cult Hindi thriller. Aditya's and Irrfan's paths first crossed when the actor was still doing television. After *The Warrior*, Irrfan had already shot *Haasil*, when Aditya and his producer Manya Patil Seth (Smita Patil's younger sister) signed him up for *Dubai Return*. Aditya claims—and rightfully so—to have given Irrfan Khan his first lead role in an Indian film.

However, Irrfan had some personal commitments—his wife was expecting their second child, Ayan, and the family's financial needs were going to increase. Bobby Bedi, the producer of *Maqbool*, had made a rather lucrative offer to Irrfan—a lot more than what he would have received from an indie project like *Dubai Return*. So Aditya and Manya agreed to give Irrfan a break. 'He was going to have a child and he was getting three times what he was getting from me,' Aditya says. 'It was natural that we let him finish *Maqbool* first.' A part of *Dubai Return* had already been shot before *Maqbool*, but the rest had to wait much longer. By the time Irrfan was set to return to *Dubai Return*, he had also made a commitment to work on *Rog*. Both *Rog* and *Dubai Return* were completed in 2005. But only one film was released.

Dubai Return is a comedy set in the Bombay underworld where small-time crooks seek attention and notoriety with the hope of climbing the social ladder within their universe. Irrfan plays Aftab Angrez, who is sent on a job to finish off a rival gang leader. Once the job is done, Aftab is sent off to Dubai to hide, much like how in *The Godfather* Michael Corleone was shipped off to Sicily on temporary exile.

Years later, Aftab returns and finds his Bombay has changed substantially. Hardly anyone remembers him and no one seems to have any recollection about the murder that Aftab had committed. So, in the rest of the film, the man who has returned from Dubai attempts to convince the new crop of gangsters that he was once a star killer.

Irrfan's co-stars in *Dubai Return* were two well-known character actors —although they come from very different tracks of cinema—Vijay Maurya and the late Razak Khan.

'*Dubai Return* is one of those films that came alive on the set, with the jugalbandi between three actors who come from different schools,' Aditya says. Vijay Maurya had acted in a couple of Anurag Kashyap films and also in television shows. Irrfan was coming from theatre and television. 'And Razak Bhai comes from the dredges of commercial cinema. They came from different film gharanas. I was just a ringmaster with these incredible social animals. They just had a complete ball. I believe that's what made the film work.'

But Razak was a bit intimidated, Aditya adds. 'He kind of told me, "*Main pakda jaoonga*. *Yeh log to actual actors hain* (I will get caught. These guys are real actors). I am a scam artist." But Aditya feels that Razak's performance in *Dubai Return* is as good as those of Irrfan and Vijay. 'It is because of the generosity and support of Irrfan,' he says. 'Irrfan was unarguably the most senior actor in terms of training. But there was a camaraderie between these people with slightly different skillsets.' There was heartbreak because the film could not release, but for Aditya that was somewhat tempered by the fact that he got to work with all of these actors.

Irrfan and Aditya's friendship continued over the years. A year later Aditya announced another project with Irrfan—*Bollywood Cop*. By this time Aditya was also spending more and more time in Italy and so he also announced that the Italian actress Maria Grazia Cucinotta (*Il Postino*) had come on board to act opposite Irrfan. *Bollywood Cop* was described as 'the story of a tough encounter specialist who misuses his power and position to exploit a sensuous Italian woman making a living in Mumbai as a Bollywood item girl'.[32]

But as it often happens in various film industries, *Bollywood Cop* never took off. Aditya would go on to collaborate with Irrfan on one more project —the HBO series called *In Treatment* (2010).

Two Great Actors, Together

Anurag Basu had directed three films produced by Mahesh Bhatt and his brother Mukesh Bhatt (*Murder*, 2004, *Tumsa Nahi Dekha*, 2004 and *Gangster*, 2006) before he directed his UTV Motion Pictures-sponsored project, *Life in a… Metro*, a series of interconnected stories, all set in Bombay. The ensemble piece included a range of actors—Dharmendra, Nafisa Ali, Kangana Ranaut, Shiney Ahuja, Shilpa Shetty, Kay Kay Menon, Konkona Sen Sharma and Irrfan Khan. And even though the film has various sources of inspiration, including one track that is plagiarized from Billy Wilder's classic film, *The Apartment*, *Life in a… Metro* is a very enjoyable film.

Despite a healthy dose of humour, *Life in a… Metro* can also be described as a series of stories of unrequited love. In my favourite segment, Konkona's Shruti is in love with her boss (Ashwin Mushran), who is a closeted gay man. Meanwhile she finds her matrimonial advertisement connection Monty (Irrfan in a slightly crazy comic persona) to be a bit crude for her liking. She catches Monty ogling at her breasts, and that is it. He is struck off from her list. But Monty does not give up easily, and in one scene, when Shruti appears to be deeply troubled, he takes her to the terrace of their office building (the two end up working in the same office) and they yell loudly to let all her anger and hostility out.

It is a terrific scene, with two of India's greatest actors, Irrfan and Konkona, screaming at the top of their lungs. But shooting the scene was not as dramatic as it appeared on the screen. 'The screaming scene was over so quickly,' Konkona recalls. 'There wasn't much to it. Except for the fact that we were laughing, joking and were comfortable. A lot of credit goes to Anurag also, because he created that environment.'

Even though Monty's role is smaller than that of some other characters, Irrfan makes the best of it, breaking into Punjabi, and towards the end, when dressed as a bridegroom, riding a horse, chasing Shruti while she is in an auto, and then in the local train. The smile Irrfan's Monty gives Shruti in the ladies compartment before they hug is just priceless.

'I remember, very, early on, before *Life in a… Metro* was not shot yet, at one point Irrfan was not going to do it or he was not sure,' Konkona says. 'And I remember telling Anurag we couldn't do it without Irrfan. I had been such a fan of his for so long. By the time *Life in a… Metro* started we already knew each other quite a bit. And we were very comfortable with each other.'

Besides *Life in a… Metro*, the two acted in a number of films together

—*Yun Hota Toh Kya Hota* (2006), *Deadline: Sirf 24 Ghante* (2006), *Aaja Nachle* (2007), *Dil Kabaddi* (2008), *7 Khoon Maaf* (2011) and *Talvar* (2015).

Konkona says she fell in love with Irrfan and Tabu when she saw them in *Maqbool*. She did not know the two actors at that time. This changed when she was offered a role in a film with Irrfan. 'If Irrfan was doing a film, usually I would do it,' she says. At times, for actors there is a degree of doubt when they are unsure about the director or the script. But if Irrfan had already signed up for a film she was offered, she would usually think, '*Accha*, *chalo* (Okay, fine), Irrfan is doing it, then there must be something good.' Konkona is a two-time National Film Award-winning, celebrated actress and one can only guess the calibre of the actor by the amount of faith she puts in him.

According to Konkona, Irrfan never reveals his technique and often it is impossible to believe that he is actually performing on-screen. 'You just believe the character, you believe the person,' she says. 'When you are working with him at that time, somehow it seems so effortless on his part.'

Irrfan and Konkona were set to act in another film, which could have been their most important collaboration, a part-international project that was to be mostly shot in the US—Mira Nair's *The Namesake* (2006). Irrfan had already begun to test international waters and it would have been a nice opening for Konkona as well. But things did not shape up as planned.

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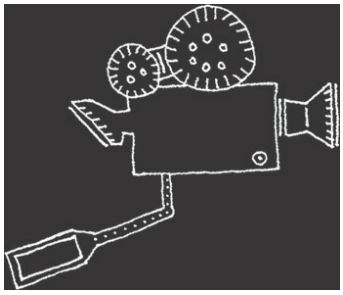
4

HOLLYWOOD CALLING: A TOUCHSTONE CONNECTING TWO WORLDS



I'm looking for those stories that touch audiences and stay with them. And wherever I find them, whether it is Hollywood, Bollywood or France, I'll jump to do it.[33]

Hollywood has been a big draw for Indian as well as international actors over many decades. The American film industry has a magnetic pull that few can resist. In 1967, Satyajit Ray visited Los Angeles, hoping to make his Hollywood production, *The Alien*, with an American studio's funding, and he considered casting Marlon Brando or Peter Sellers or Steve McQueen in it. That film was never made. During the peak of their careers, Indian actors, from I.S. Johar to Kabir Bedi and Shashi Kapoor, worked in American and other European productions.

In 1999, while promoting his British film, *East Is East*, in New York City, the late actor Om Puri told me his one big regret was that he would never get roles given to Dustin Hoffman and Robert De Niro. At least Om Puri did manage to get small breaks in the West, including two Hollywood films directed by Mike Nichols—*Wolf* (1994) and *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007). He also acted in a few British projects.

Later, a couple of Indian actresses attempted to swim in the Hollywood seas. Freida Pinto got a lot of notice after the success of *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). But after a series of high-profile films—Woody Allen's *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger* (2010), Julian Schnabel's *Miral* (2010), Rupert Wyatt's *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011) and Tarsem Singh's *Immortals* (2011), her Hollywood career came to a grinding halt. Aishwarya Rai made a concerted effort to work in Hollywood, but again, with mixed results. Most of the films she acted in—from *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) to *The Mistress of Spices* (2005) and *The Pink Panther 2* (2009) failed at the box office. Eventually Aishwarya's priorities changed. She chose to get married and start a family in India.

There are currently two Indian actors, Priyanka Chopra and Irrfan Khan, who have managed to straddle different projects in both Hollywood and Bollywood. Priyanka's Hollywood career post-*Quantico* is still being written.

Irrfan, on the other hand, now has a solid career in Hollywood, and, of course, Bollywood.

‘A Lifetime in a Fist’[34]

When Mira Nair was in the midst of completing her adaptation of William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (2004), her mother-in-law died of negligence at a New York hospital. Nair’s in-laws were from Uganda, but she and her husband buried her mother-in-law on a snowy day in New Jersey. On the way back to India, to shoot the closing scenes of *Vanity Fair*, Nair started to read Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. ‘I felt Jhumpa understood my grief,’ Mira says. ‘It completely captured me—a thirty-year cornucopia of the 70s Calcutta that I had grown up in, all the way to today’s Manhattan.’

She acquired the rights to the novel and asked her friend and regular collaborator Sooni Taraporevala to transform the novel into a script. When it came to casting, Mira first thought of Bengali actors. For the Ashima Ganguli character, she initially considered Rani Mukerji. She even approached Konkona Sen Sharma, who did say yes, but then pulled out at the last minute to act in a film that her mother Aparna Sen was about to direct. Eventually Mira had to think beyond Bengali actors, and she was lucky to find Tabu to play Ashima.

However, from the beginning of the casting process, Mira was sure about one thing. ‘Irrfan was always going to play Ashoke Ganguli,’ she says. Tabu and Irrfan are not Bengali, so Mira immersed them into Bengali culture. And everything about her two leads, their hand gestures, the way they tilt their heads, etc., convinced even discerning viewers that the two actors were Bengali.

To get his Bengali accent right, Irrfan spent a lot of time with Jhumpa Lahiri’s father, a retired university librarian who lived in Rhode Island, while a Queens-based Bengali restaurateur and caterer, Shankar, became Irrfan’s Bengali coach. ‘At one point Irrfan went so deep into the accent that we had to pull it back,’ Mira says. ‘It was challenging to do a speech with an authentic Indian-Bengali accent, but also understandable for the West without

it being subtitled.'

Even though Irrfan's wife is Bengali, he had to learn specific Bengali sentences to play his character. 'But he is proficient,' Mira adds. 'Unlike most Indian actors, Irrfan really works hard. If he needs any help, any crutches he can see, he grabs it, then he distils it and takes it to another level.'

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel was essentially the story about Gogol (played by the Indian-American actor Kal Penn)—a second-generation Bengali-American, son of Ashima and Ashoke, burdened by the name his father gave him since he believed that a copy of Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* had once saved his life in a train accident. 'We all came out of Gogol's *Overcoat*,' Ashoke tells his clueless drugged-out teenage son Gogol in the film. 'One day you will understand.' It is one of the most moving scenes in the film and it is repeated towards the end as well. There is no way a person watching that scene will not feel tears well up in their eyes.

In Sooni and Mira's able hands, the film also became the love story between Ashoke and Ashima, a young couple from Calcutta, growing into their marriage and life in America, their adopted country. Mira modelled the couple's marriage, a quiet romance between two kindred souls, based on her observations of her in-laws.

In *The Namesake*, from their violent, seductive characters in *Maqbool*, Irrfan and Tabu transformed themselves into a calm couple living in suburban America. There are some lovely delicate scenes between Ashoke and Ashima, where Irrfan and Tabu say a lot without really speaking. Not once do they raise their voice. In fact, the only time Ashoke gets slightly upset with Ashima is when she does her first laundry in the US, and by accident she puts his sweaters in the dryer and shrinks them. Then there is that priceless scene when the two quietly drink their last cup of tea together, before Ashoke leaves for his teaching job in Cleveland, leaving Ashima behind in New Jersey.

'That generation didn't know about Hallmark cards or Valentine's Day weekend sort of romance,' Mira says. 'They would just sit together in a kitchen over tea, and they would not say anything. That was what I called the love scene in honour of my Ammi and Dada, because that was what they would do.'

And she adds, 'Shooting that scene was so divine because they are such brilliant actors and they are also very funny, in pouring the tea, stirring the sugar and refusing to be sentimental and boring. We had choreographed the

scene, but loosely.'

Towards the beginning of *The Namesake* there is a beautifully shot, delicate lovemaking scene between Ashoke and Ashima. Besides that, there are only a few times where Irrfan and Tabu's characters actually express love for each other, but it's all done in very quiet tones. During a trip to Calcutta, Ashoke and Ashima walk through the Victoria Memorial gardens and he asks her why she had decided to marry him. She jokes a bit, then grabs his shirt and asks, 'You want me to say, "I love you", like the Americans,' and briefly hides her face in his chest. And Irrfan gives the most charming, yet a tad shy smile, and simply says, '*Haan* (Yes).' It is a precious moment where two characters briefly reveal their vulnerable sides and actually speak out their feelings for each other. Later, during a trip to the Taj Mahal, Ashima says, 'Just imagine how much Shah Jahan must have loved Mumtaz to make this for her.' To which Ashoke responds, 'Other husbands also love their wives, Ashima,' and Irrfan grabs Tabu's hand. 'Only they cannot afford to build Taj Mahals.' Suddenly Gogol walks up to his parents and Ashima pulls her hand away, embarrassed.

Irrfan gives us so many heartbreaking moments in the film, including the last time we see Ashoke Ganguli as he calls his wife from a pay phone booth at a Cleveland hospital. Mira often uses shots inspired from other films, art pieces and classic photographs. That shot of Irrfan in the phone booth was inspired by a Garry Winogrand photograph. The set designer built the phone booth in the corridor of the hospital to duplicate that photograph. 'I believe in showing hands,' Mira says, 'hands being the sign of life. So the camera is there and you are seeing his life.'

Directing Irrfan was like working with a friend, as Mira recalls. 'He could tell by looking at my face if I was happy or not with a shot,' she says. She remembers shooting one of the most beautiful scenes when Ashoke and Gogol are in a car and the father explains the significance of Nikolai Gogol to his son. 'He did that scene very nicely, but I was looking at him like a puppy after that,' she says. 'And he asked, "*Kuch chahiye naa, tujhe* (You need something else, right)?" And I said, "*Haan, halka sa ankh mein ansoon, magar neeche nahi ana chaiye* (Yes, a slight tear in your eye, but it should not roll down your cheek)." And he said, "*Theek hai, Mira* (All right, Mira)." I usually don't talk to actors like this to programme their tears, especially tears that don't fall. And that's the scene we have from the second take. That scene required fine-tuning. It looks effortless, but I am sure it wasn't.'

At times Irrfan would also surprise Mira, like in the scene when Gogol brings his girlfriend Maxine (Jacinda Barrett) to meet his parents for the first time. In one brief moment, the otherwise reserved and fairly conservative Ashoke Ganguly gives an appreciative once-over look to Gogol's American girlfriend. Sooni had not written that in the script, and neither had Mira discussed anything of this sort with Irrfan. So that was all Irrfan, improvising a little humour into his otherwise serious role. 'That brief touch cracked Ashoke's dignified veneer,' Mira says. 'It gave the audience a sense of his vulnerability.'

Mira also has this observation about how Irrfan takes direction. 'You talk to him and you notice a quiet moment, when he just reflects on what he has to become. It was not like *fatak sey* (instantaneously). There is always contemplation. He's not winning a popularity contest on the set. Tabu does it more effortlessly on the surface. She doesn't have any acting training and it's amazing. Irrfan does it more quietly, but he never gets it wrong.'

The Namesake shoot was the first time Irrfan visited the US. And Mira invited him to New York City during the prep time for the film and put him up in a hotel in Times Square. 'He was completely like Ashoke Ganguli. He was like a beautiful child. '*Main to study kar raha hoon yaar* (I am studying everything).' Mira also felt leaving Irrfan in the midst of Manhattan was helpful for him to get into the Ashoke Ganguli character. 'We didn't mollycoddle him, inviting him over every day,' she says. 'We let him be there. Shankar the caterer was his main friend. And we wanted him to understand that alienation.'

The Namesake premiered at the Telluride Film Festival held in the ski mountains of Colorado in September 2006. I was there at the film's premiere. I remember crying watching Irrfan in the moving scene when he goes to his son's room to gift him a copy of *The Overcoat*. There is a desperate desire in the father to connect with his son, to tell him everything that he has been holding in for so long. But he fails. The rejection Irrfan's Ashoke feels is devastating. He is quiet, helpless, and then decides to give up. That scene still breaks my heart each time I watch the film.

The film was a big success internationally, earning $20 million worldwide, including $13.6 million in the US alone. Western critics praised the film. Irrfan even received a significant nomination—Best Supporting Male Actor for the Independent Spirit Award. While Irrfan did not win the award, he attended the ceremony held under a tent on the beach in Santa

Monica, California. He saw a number of famous actors, including Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. He would soon work with Angelina in *A Mighty Heart* (2007). He also saw Dustin Hoffman, Forest Whitaker and Philip Seymour Hoffman in the audience.

Later, speaking to a publication in India, Irrfan said, 'Dustin Hoffman sat in the row right in front of me. But I couldn't bring myself to tap him on the shoulder and introduce myself. How do you approach actors whom you've admired half your life? Maybe I need to learn that now.'[35]

However, since Irrfan was still a new face in the West, most critics barely mentioned his name in the reviews of *The Namesake*. In India, Irrfan Khan got a lovely message from Sharmila Tagore after she watched the film. 'You should thank your parents for giving birth to you,' she wrote.

One person, however, who was not thrilled with the film, was Irrfan's own mother. After the premiere of *The Namesake* in Bombay, where Irrfan brought his mother as a guest, he asked her what she thought of the film. His mother asked where the film's director was. When Irrfan pointed towards Mira Nair who was standing somewhat close, his mother said, '*Bula, usko, bula*. *Usko mera baccha hee mila tha maarne ke liye* (Call her, call her. Could she only find my son to kill in the film)?'[36] Irrfan eventually went and told Mira what his mother had said, and the director had a hearty laugh.

One Actor, Many Memorable Roles

Two years after *The Namesake* premiered, Mira Nair cast Irrfan in two very different shorts. The first was a film called *Migration*, written by filmmaker Zoya Akhtar and a part of the four *AIDS Jaago* (2007) shorts Mira produced for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Mira also directed *Migration*, while the other three were helmed by Vishal Bhardwaj, Santosh Sivan and Farhan Akhtar.

In *Migration*, Irrfan plays a closeted gay man who has a partner—Arjun Mathur, playing Imran, the young lover. Irrfan's Abhay is also married to Divya (Sameera Reddy), but the couple hardly engages in sex. Quite by chance Divya has sex with a construction worker, Birju (Shiney Ahuja),

working outside her flat. In 17 minutes *Migration* shows how unprotected sex can transmit the HIV virus from a gay man (Imran) to his partner (Abhay) to his wife (Divya) to the construction worker and eventually to his wife and newborn baby.

It was the first and the only time Irrfan played a gay man. For a short film, so much had to be packed into *Migration* and there was not much time to develop characters. So Irrfan immediately displayed the characteristics and mannerisms of a closeted gay man who tries to hide his sexuality, but things seem obvious if one sees his small gestures or the tone of his voice.

'He was playing a closeted homosexual who, like many, has the façade and the angst,' Mira says. 'But he was studying the mannerisms, mostly as I saw it, of some gay men around me. People who are around us, some of them are not flamboyant and some of them are. It was the spirit that was important to him. That character was totally in the closet, really anguished and cruel to his wife and to his partner.'

The focus in *Migration* is on Shiney's Birju, but even in a small role, Irrfan leaves a mark on the story. Mira Nair's promise to Irrfan Khan that one day she would work with him had really come true.

The second small project the two worked on in 2008 was the segment in the multi-star cast anthology, *New York, I Love You*. In the segment 'Kosher Vegetarian', written by author Suketu Mehta, Irrfan plays Mansukhbhai, a Gujarati Jain diamond merchant (a world Suketu knows well—his family knows many Gujarati Jains and his father deals in diamond trading) operating out of New York City's Diamond District on West 47th Street. His only employee is an orthodox Jewish woman, Rifka Malone (played by Natalie Portman). Rifka is about to get married, but in a brief moment in the office the two have an emotional connection—when Mansukhbhai starts to imagine if he could possibly marry Rifka in an Indian traditional wedding (we briefly see Natalie dressed as an Indian bride) or have a Jewish ceremony. Irrfan even imagines being a groom at an orthodox Hasidic wedding.

'There were references to Jains getting bald as well as orthodox Jewish women shaving their heads,' Mira says. 'But the orthodoxy vanishes for a moment and they fall in love, both equally.' About the actors who performed their roles on the four-day shoot, Mira says they worked really well together, like the pros they were. 'But it was nothing like two big stars are there, nothing like that. It's lovely to be with people who are restless to express themselves creatively with this depth of contentment to know that this is what

we must do on this earth.'

About working with Irrfan, Mira also adds this, 'It's like fine-tuning a great instrument, because he is always on otherwise. Irrfan hugely enjoys what he does. It's not like pressure or that he has to study. I mean it is all of that, but it doesn't come across in him. Nothing of the sort where an actor would say, '*Kya saala, karna hai mujhe kaam* (What, man, I have to work).'

A Masterclass in Flawless Delivery

Irrfan's powerful performance in *The Namesake* and also in Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart* (2009) was noticed by an American actor, Dan Futterman. Dan played the American journalist Daniel Pearl in *A Mighty Heart* (more on the film a little later) and also stepped into the role of an executive producer on the HBO series *In Treatment* (2010), a remake of an Israeli show, *BeTipul* (2005).

Besides Irrfan being cast in seven segments of the HBO show, there was another connection with *The Namesake*. The *In Treatment* team had hired Jhumpa Lahiri as a consultant. The segments with Irrfan were written by playwright and Pulitzer Prize nominee, Adam Rapp, who mined into Jhumpa's experiences and memory to understand Bengali culture. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Rapp said this about Irrfan, 'I…wanted to write for an actor with a sense of humour and great depth. I truly think Irrfan is one of the greatest actors alive.'[37]

In both the American and Israeli shows, a therapist (Gabriel Byrne in the American series) meets with his clients for half-hour sessions. Irrfan plays the role of Sunil Sanyal, a middle-aged Bengali widower who has recently arrived in the US and moved in with his son (New York-based actor Samrat Chakrabarti) and his American wife. Sunil is depressed because of the loss of his wife, but he is also having a tough time coping with how much his son has changed, and especially, his daughter-in-law's American way of life.

Irrfan gives a devastating performance in the show, first presented as a dishevelled-looking, depressed man who is also rather quiet. Although, as time progresses, he gets more comfortable with the therapist, Dr Paul Weston

(Gabriel Byrne).

Irrfan has gone on record to say this was the toughest role he has played. Speaking to *The New York Times*, he said, 'An emotional input into the part was needed, and from the beginning I was feeling, "I'll fall short. Where will I draw on these things from my life? I don't have any experience in them." And they were intense.'[38]

Also, the show had long takes, nearly 14 minutes each, and so, for the first time since Irrfan had graduated from NSD, he had to memorize long passages of the script. It reminded him of the time he was studying for his exams. It became such a challenge for him that one night he called Naseeruddin Shah in India for his advice.

As Naseer recalls, this is how the phone conversation went. 'Irrfan called and said, "*Mere char-char page ke* dialogues *hain. Kaise memorize karoonga? Aap kaise yaad karte ho?" Maine kaha, "Bhaiya time kitna hai aapke pass?"* He said, *"Ek raat hai." "Phir to yeh raat to gayee tumharee. Sona wona bhool jao. Raat bhar baith kar yaad karo. Koi aur tareeka nahi hai. Koi jadoo ki pudiya nahi hai mere pass. Main hazaar dafa padhta hoon tab yaad hota hai. Is raat jitni baar padh sako padh lo*."' ('Irrfan called and said, "I have dialogues as long as four pages. How do I memorize them? How do you memorize such long dialogues?" I asked him, "How much time do you have?" He said, "Only one night." "Then this night is gone. Forget about going to sleep. Sit up the whole night and memorize it. There is no other way. I don't have any magic trick. I read dialogues one thousand times, only then I am able to memorize them. So tonight try and read the dialogues as many times as you can."')

'And he delivered,' Naseer adds. 'He's very good in the show.'

To work with Irrfan, especially fine-tuning his Bengali accent, HBO hired the actor's friend and director, Aditya Bhattacharya. 'My paperwork said acting coach, which is very strange, because you can't be an acting coach to Irrfan,' Aditya says. They spent time together in Irrfan's hotel room in Times Square while the actor would learn his lines for the show.

Soon Aditya realized that the darkness of Sunil Sanyal's character was having an adverse effect on Irrfan. 'I am his friend, but I felt I became almost the wife who had to hide the drinks, make sure he goes to bed on time,' Aditya adds. A few times at night when Aditya would be heading back to where he was staying, he would be in half a mind to return to be with Irrfan. He even made a few calls to talk to Sutapa Sikdar who was in Bombay at that

time, informing her that he was concerned about Irrfan's well-being. 'I literally felt worried for him,' he adds. 'There is a fragility to an actor and we don't realize how much what they do affects them.'

No wonder Irrfan told Anupama Chopra during an interview that when the show ended, he yelled loudly, as though he had won the World Cup.[39]

Working with Irrfan on one of the episodes gave Samrat Chakrabarti a chance to watch the actor and his method. 'When we would be outside, taking a break, he could drop his character and make jokes,' Samrat says. 'But when he entered the set and he would put on his blazer, his body language would change. The way he would walk, sit down, roll the cigarette, he would be in his trance, his meditation, in his process.'

'He would do an interesting gesture of touching his ear, which is not common in America,' he adds. 'He knows how to do that, creating his character, keeping it authentic and natural, in every take. He would give a pause and look the other way.'

Then there were times when Samrat took Irrfan out to show him around New York City. The two had bonded over the Bengali connection—Irrfan's wife being Bengali. So he started calling his co-actor 'Shamrat'. They saw a play at the Public Theater, ate meals in different parts of the city and even walked late at night in Times Square. And they had a secret language together. 'He would see the garbage on the street and would mutter in Hindi, "It's quite dirty here." Even on the set, he would look at a script supervisor and ask, "*Yeh kya keh raha hai* (What is he saying)?" He would sometimes complain that there were so many lines.'

Writing in *The New York Times*, Alessandra Stanley called Sunil (Irrfan's character) the series's 'most interesting patient'. 'It helped', she added, 'that Irrfan is deft and compelling in the role of a grieving Indian émigré struggling to retain his dignity in an alien culture.'[40]

Aditya Bhattacharya remembers a couple of memorable incidents with Irrfan. One day the two were eating brunch at a well-known restaurant in New York City with producer Leslie Holleran (*The Cider House Rules*, 1999 and *Chocolat*, 2000). This was a year after the huge success of Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* and everyone wanted to meet Irrfan.

Suddenly Irrfan elbowed Aditya. He had noticed that actor Mark Ruffalo was sitting on the next table. But he was there with a large group of people, perhaps his family. Irrfan told Aditya that he was a big fan of Mark and somehow wanted an introduction.

‘I asked Leslie if she knew him, and she said she did, but she didn’t feel like walking up to Mark,’ Aditya says. ‘She said it didn’t look right. But I could also see Irrfan thinking, “*Hello toh bolte hain* (Let’s at least say hello).”’

‘When we were leaving, Irrfan looked disappointed, but then something incredible happened,’ Aditya adds. ‘Mark saw him, put his hand forward and said, “Hey man, I love your work.” And Irrfan probably saw sparkling lights all over.’

Another day Aditya and Irrfan took a cab from Manhattan to Brooklyn where the show was being shot. The two got into the cab and were chatting in Hindi and English, when Aditya noticed the driver’s eyes in the rear mirror, as if he was observing the two.

‘When we got down—it wasn’t a cheap ride—and Irrfan went to pay, the driver refused to take the money,’ Aditya says. He was a Pakistani driver and he hugged Irrfan. ‘He said in Urdu to Irrfan, “After everything you have gifted us, the joy you have given us, I cannot take money from you.” There was no selfie or autograph taken at the moment. It was just this. Irrfan said, “These are the things that make it worthwhile.” And only then it struck me: the power of what we, especially what actors, do.’

Angelina and Irrfan

A year after *The Namesake*, Irrfan acted in two Hollywood projects, both with India connections. The first was *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007), director Wes Anderson’s whimsical story of three brothers, more or less estranged (played by Adrien Brody, Jason Schwartzman and Owen Wilson) on an adventurous journey in India in search of their mother (Anjelica Huston). Irrfan played a brief role of a villager whose daughter accidentally drowns and the brothers attend the little girl’s funeral.

Irrfan has no dialogue in the film, although his performance is very effective. His role is so small that one wonders why he would have worked in this film. But it is also true that Irrfan was at the cusp of breaking into Hollywood, and surely some casting agents and producers would have

noticed him, especially after the success of *The Namesake* in the US market. He was at a stage where any exposure was good for him and he definitely did the right thing in accepting *The Darjeeling Limited* role.

In an interview he said this about his role, 'Wes wrote a small part for me and I was more than happy to just be part of his film.'[41]

A few months before *The Darjeeling Limited* was released, Irrfan played an important supporting role in Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart*, the story of the kidnapping and the murder of *The Wall Street Journal's* South Asia Bureau Chief, Daniel Pearl. It was based on the book written by his widow, Mariane Pearl. Irrfan got the third billing after Angelina Jolie (Mariane Pearl) and Dan Futterman (playing Daniel Pearl, but mostly in flashbacks).

A Mighty Heart would be the third film in the post-9/11 trilogy which Michael Winterbottom directed. The first, *In This World* (2002), traced the desperate journey of two Afghan boys from a refugee camp in Pakistan to Britain; while *The Road to Guantánamo* (2006) was about young British Muslims imprisoned by the US in Guantanamo Bay after they travelled to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Mostly set in Pakistan, in and around Karachi (the film was actually shot in Pune), and produced by Brad Pitt's Plan B Entertainment, a production company he started with his ex-wife Jennifer Aniston, *A Mighty Heart* is a powerful tale of intrigue, some sure-footed investigation and finally, a tragedy that shook the world, very soon after the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001. Angelina played a very pregnant Mariane Pearl, with her take of the French journalist's persona, including her pronounced accent. Irrfan played Captain, a mysterious Pakistani military intelligence officer who became sympathetic to Mariane and Daniel Pearl's friend, the Indian-American journalist, Asra Nomani, who was living in Karachi at that time. The Pearls were guests of Asra before Daniel disappeared. Captain has a solid presence in the film, but in real life, little is known about the mysterious man.

Irrfan is introduced in the film in a subtle manner. After Daniel is reported missing, a lot of officials, some Pakistanis, but more Americans, show up at Asra Nomani's house. We first see Irrfan getting out of a car outside Asra's house. With short hair and a moustache, he looks like a Pakistani secret police officer. Then, a few minutes later, in the midst of all the confusion inside the house, he says hello to Mariane Pearl. 'Who are

you?' she asks, and he responds, 'I am Javed Habib, SSP, CID.' At this stage, unless you know how big a star Irrfan is, you cannot tell this man has a major role to play in the film. He appears to be like a smaller character in the sea of other white Americans who keep coming to Asra's house.

But Irrfan's character—he's always referred to as Captain—slowly grows in importance. Once the investigation starts, you know Irrfan's Captain is in charge. There is a brief lovely moment between Irrfan and Angelina when late one night they are standing outside Asra's house and it is raining hard. Irrfan quotes a Pakistani help at Asra's home, 'He's saying God is raining. God is coming down with the rain.' There has been so much tension in the air, with no definite news about Daniel Pearl's whereabouts. But the two characters look at each other and smile.

And then there comes a time when, out of frustration, Captain explodes, trying to track a phone call. '*Arre hamare pass waqt nahi hai, behenc**d* (We don't have much time, you sister****er),' he says, yelling at an operator on the phone.

It is a powerful performance, and Irrfan shines, despite the presence of one of the biggest global stars, Angelina Jolie, whose character is the main focus of the film. It also helps that the two, as well as the other main actors in the film, are seasoned performers, because Michael Winterbottom never works with a script, and no dialogues are given out.

'He doesn't direct you; he trusts you completely once he has done the casting,' Irrfan said in an interview about Michael Winterbottom.[42] 'He has a very keen eye about the person and he's looking for the elements he needs for them to find the character. So, half of his work is done in the casting, and during the shoot, because he shoots with a digital video camera, there's no time restriction, you can go on improvising things. And he allows you to improvise a lot.'

In another interview Irrfan elaborated on Michael Winterbottom's style of shooting the film. 'He wouldn't even say "cut" once the scene was over! He would wait for actors to come up with something to add. By the time the scene is shot, you, as an actor, have almost rewritten the script.'[43]

Some actors may find it a challenge when the director does not hold their hand. But for Irrfan it was a breath of fresh air. 'I loved it,' he added.[44] 'Actors depend on lines, you know, they depend on what is there in the script. But there is no safety net. It was liberating, actually. Because that's where you start connecting to the character because you have to be on your toes all

the time.'

While Irrfan was preparing for the role, the studio arranged for him to speak to the real Captain on the phone. 'We talked for a bit but it was almost like I could feel him being uncomfortable with the situation…to talk to somebody who is in the secret service.'[45] Eventually Irrfan relied on Mariane Pearl's book and her take on Captain and the entire unfortunate episode.

A Mighty Heart premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2007. Only a few years before, Irrfan had visited Cannes with Ashvin Kumar and said that one day, he would be back at the festival and walk the red carpet with a film of his own. He fulfilled that promise four years later when he arrived in Cannes with Michael Winterbottom and his co-stars Angelina Jolie, Dan Futterman and Archie Punjabi.

A Mighty Heart opened in India in October 2007. Around that time Irrfan's NSD classmate Mita Vashisht had moved into a new flat in Bombay. When her new refrigerator arrived, wrapped in a newspaper, Mita saw an advertisement on it for the film along with a picture of Irrfan and Angelina. 'I remember thinking, "Okay, he's made it,"' Mita says.

A Mighty Heart as well as *The Darjeeling Limited* were projects that came to Irrfan through casting agents in India. His impactful performance in *The Namesake* definitely had a lot to do with the work that came his way. He did not have to audition for the roles, but he had still not started to actively look for international projects. All of that was going to change with another film that was going to be offered to him—a seemingly small film that surpassed everyone's expectations and swept the Oscars with eight wins. It was a film called *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Jai Ho!

British director Danny Boyle had made his name as an innovative director with films ranging from *Shallow Grave* (1994) to the cult favourite *Trainspotting* (1996), ranked as no. 10 in the British Film Institute's (BFI's) list of top 100 British films of the twentieth century. He had already made seven films when he was handed the script of *Slumdog Millionaire*, based on

the Indian Foreign Service officer Vikas Swaroop's novel, *Q&A*. The book was entirely set in India, a country Danny had not visited so far.

In making *Slumdog Millionaire*, a rags-to-riches fable, with romance, crime and a whole lot of music, Danny entered an uncharted territory—attempting to marry popular Hindi cinema, its language and ethos to his brand of cinema made famous with films like *Trainspotting*, where fast-paced camerawork became one of the characters in the tale of several down and out young drug addicts. And he did that using A.R. Rahman's hyper-energetic original soundtrack.

Slumdog Millionaire is about hope and the new Indian, post-liberalization, anything-can-be-done attitude that energizes even the middle and lower classes in the country. The film narrates the story of a poor Muslim teenager, Jamal Malik (played by Dev Patel, then an unknown teenage television actor from the UK), who wins big time—20 million rupees on the Indian version of the TV show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*? The film's cast included Anil Kapoor on the seat as the emcee, a lovely Indian model and TV host Freida Pinto and Irrfan Khan, once again playing the role of a rough and angry police inspector investigating a possible fraud in the game show. After the film's premiere at the Telluride Film Festival, Danny Boyle would tell me that he was very familiar with Hindi films, and knew of Anil Kapoor and Irrfan's career. He had seen films ranging from *Lagaan, Taal* and *The Namesake* before he set out to cast actors for *Slumdog Millionaire*.

In fact, the film's production company initially approached Shahrukh Khan for the role of the TV show host. But the star was not available and so they settled for their second choice of Anil Kapoor.[46]

The Bombay that Boyle explores, with its slums and chawls, is a teeming jungle of gang warfare, Hindu-Muslim conflicts and children being exploited and trained to beg on the streets. But there is also something very attractive about Boyle's Bombay—with its colours, pulsating music and high energy.

Irrfan Khan somewhat repeats his *A Mighty Heart* role—although here he has lesser screen time playing the interrogating officer who uses all the tactics in the book (and some outside the book), from violence and torture of the accused, Jamal Malik, to showing his kind heart.

Later, speaking to *Time* magazine, Danny Boyle discussed how he thought Irrfan's role was very crucial to the film's narrative. 'You can't put your finger on it,' but Irrfan instinctively could find the "moral centre" of any character, Danny told *Time*.[47] And it is true that in *Slumdog Millionaire*, we

start to sense the police officer might actually believe that Dev Patel's Jamal is innocent.

'A little electricity will loosen his tongue,' Irrfan says in the most matter-of-fact manner, while Jamal is shown hanging from the roof with his hands tied. And when Jamal faints while he is still hanging, Irrfan screams at his junior officer (Saurabh Shukla), 'Now we will have Amnesty International here peeing in their pants about human rights.' It was a role that we have seen Irrfan play earlier as well, but for western audiences it was one of the first times they really noticed the acting range of this actor.

One of the problems with *Slumdog Millionaire* was the varying accents of the Indian actors speaking in English. The middle-level Jamal (three actors played the role), Tanay Chheda, speaks with a perfect English medium school accent, while Dev Patel can barely hide his British accent. Anil Kapoor has a refined accent, and Irrfan Khan sounds like someone who knows English, but is more comfortable speaking in Hindi. So, while Irrfan gives a sparkling performance—angry, sarcastic and at times a tad sympathetic to Jamal, one can tell he is not used to acting in English. Perhaps Western critics and even Danny Boyle did not notice the disparities in accents, but to many Indian ears it was jarring.

Slumdog Millionaire essentially belongs to Freida Pinto and Dev Patel—two unknown actors who became overnight sensations (Freida first, while Dev took a few more years to get the recognition, and eventually even received an Oscar nomination). But the success of *Slumdog Millionaire* opened doors for Irrfan—who had already worked in three foreign productions in a matter of a few years, *The Namesake*, *The Darjeeling Limited* and *A Mighty Heart*—like never before, more than it did for Anil Kapoor. Three years later Anil got a small role in *Mission Impossible: The Ghost Protocol*. That film, a guest role on hit TV show *24* and the fact that he bought the Indian rights to the series, was essentially the extent of his Hollywood outing.

However, *Slumdog Millionaire* made Irrfan Khan the first Hindi film actor of his generation to cross over to Hollywood. Speaking to *Time* magazine after the success of *Slumdog Millionaire*, Danny Boyle said that he expected Western studios would try to replicate the film's success with movies set in India. And he predicted that Irrfan would be even more in demand, since he was 'quintessentially Indian, and yet something else besides. He is a touchstone connecting two worlds', Danny said.[48]

A Desire to Tell Compelling Stories

During the press tour of *Slumdog Millionaire*, Irrfan Khan met with an Indian-American in Hollywood, Jai Khanna, who was then a manager at Brillstein Entertainment Partners. The introduction was made by Hrithik Roshan and his father Rakesh Roshan who were also represented by Jai. As a management team, Jai and the Brillstein team hired an agent, a lawyer and a publicist for Irrfan in Hollywood. Irrfan's agents are Nate Steadman and David DeCamillo at The Gersh Agency.

According to Jai, Irrfan's work in earlier projects, that became his calling card, *The Warrior*, *The Namesake* and *A Mighty Heart*, were not huge box office hits, but they were solid projects which gave him an advantage and a head start over any other actor. 'I think he deserves a lot of credit for opening Hollywood's eyes to the talent of Indian actors and paving a path for others,' adds Jai.

So it was through the efforts of Jai Khanna and Brillstein Entertainment Partners that Irrfan got major Hollywood projects ranging from *In Treatment* (2010) and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) to *Life of Pi* (2012), *Jurassic World* (2015), *Inferno* (2016) and *Puzzle* (2018).

Irrfan's desire to work in Hollywood, while also managing a growing career in India, was driven by the desire to focus on solid, meaningful projects. As Jai Khanna says, 'He is drawn to compelling stories and strong characters, while being one of the best to discover emerging directors. Big or small, it needs to connect to him on a visceral level. His career is indicative of his amazing taste, whether it's in the US or internationally.'

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[39]'Irrfan Khan Interview with Anupama Chopra', *Film Companion*, 8 May 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lbjz76KV5ok&t=534s

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[42]'A Mighty Heart—Irrfan Khan Interview', indielondon.co.uk, http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/a-mighty-heart-irrfan-khan-interview

[43]'On a Movie Date with Irrfan Khan,' *The Hindustan Times*, 4 July 2016, https://www.hindustantimes.com/brunch/on-a-movie-date-with-irrfan-khan/story-hrFYkA9jsjWN4cWUlTfN7M.html

[44]'A Mighty Heart—Irrfan Khan Interview', indielondon.co.uk, http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/a-mighty-heart-irrfan-khan-interview

[45]Ibid.

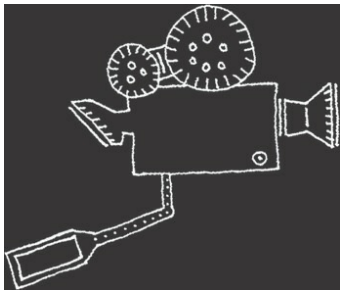
[46]'Deciphering Bollywood', *Mumbai Mirror*, 7 September 2018, https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/opinion/columnists/aseem-chhabra/deciphering-bollywood/articleshow/15849690.cms

[47]Ibid.

[48]'Keeping It Real', *Time*, 15 February 2010

5

A-LIST HOLLYWOOD PROJECTS: A MONTAGE



When the first Jurassic Park came out, I barely had the money to see it, and now I'm playing a part.[49]

It is a script no one could have written, Irrfan Khan left Jaipur in the mid-1980s hoping to free himself from the clutches of a small town, with dreams of becoming a Hindi film actor. But who would have imagined that one day, a few decades later, the same Irrfan, a trained NSD actor, would eventually act in Oscar-winning films. That streak of luck started with a small British film, with an Indian cast—most of them not known outside, and yet, *Slumdog Millionaire*'s explosive success in 2008 did wonders for its lead actors, especially for Irrfan Khan, who was already on the cusp of acquiring greater and bigger projects.

'No one could have imagined I would be an actor; I was so shy, so thin,' he told *The Guardian*.[50] 'But the desire was so intense, I thought I'd suffocate.'

Among the prestigious projects Irrfan acted in after *Slumdog Millionaire* was Taiwanese-American filmmaker Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* (2012), a much-loved film that won four Oscars.

Playing Pi

Spanish-Canadian author Yann Martel's life-affirming, Man Booker Prize-winning novel *Life of Pi* (2001) was a huge international bestseller. In 2003, Fox 2000 Pictures acquired the film rights of the book—the story of an Indian family on a ship with animals from a zoo in Pondicherry, a storm that destroys all, except a teenager Piscine Molitor 'Pi' Patel and a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. The story narrated by the adult Pi (played by Irrfan Khan), now living in Montreal, focuses mostly on his happy childhood, the

shipwreck and his 227-day-long arduous journey on a lifeboat with his companion, Richard Parker.

Fox 2000 considered many A-list filmmakers, from M. Night Shyamalan, who was attracted to the project because it was set in Pondicherry (he was born in that city), but was tied up with two back-to-back films, *The Village* (2004) and *Lady in the Water* (2006); Oscar-winning Mexican filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón (*Gravity*, 2014 and *Roma*, 2018) and even the French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Amelie*, 2001). Eventually the project landed with the Taiwanese-American Oscar-winning director Ang Lee (*Sense and Sensibility*, 1995; *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 2000; *Brokeback Mountain*, 2005). One of the most difficult films made in recent times by a Hollywood studio, the 3D epic *Life of Pi*, would earn Ang his second Best Director Oscar (the first being for *Brokeback Mountain*).

When it came to casting, Ang's first task was to find the right actor to play the young Pi, who was to spend a substantial part during the making of the film alone in a lifeboat floating on a large water tank created on an abandoned airport runway in Taiwan, staring and talking to a make-believe tiger. Richard Parker was created later with CGI technology. Since a part of the film had to be shot in India, Ang Lee had to convince the Indian government that he actually did not use a real animal in the shoot![51]

After Delhi-based actor Suraj Sharma was cast to play the 16-year-old Indian boy (Suraj was 19 when the film was released) from the nearly 3,000 auditions, Ang and his casting agents started to look for an actor to play the adult Pi. Irrfan's name was on top of the list. For one thing, he was taller than Suraj, and that made sense to Ang. The director had already seen Irrfan in *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The Namesake* (2006) and *A Mighty Heart* (2007).

'There were only a couple of actors to choose from in India and he was the top choice,' Ang says. 'Obviously I wanted to make an international film, but I also chose him for his good acting. It wasn't like I had a list of five people to choose from. And his height was working.' Ang cast another fine Indian actor, Adil Hussain, as younger Pi's father. Tabu played Pi's mother. Although the two played mother and son in the film, Tabu and Irrfan did not share any screen time.

Ang says that *Life of Pi* was 'unfilmable' for several reasons, but especially because it challenges the notion of narration. Irrfan's Pi starts the film with a voiceover, giving the narrative a first person feeling. But much of the narration is also in third person, as we see the actual action taking place

with the younger Pi and his lifeboat mate, Richard Parker, the CGI-created tiger. And Irrfan's toughest task was to wrap up the movie emotionally, Ang adds.

The story that Pi narrates actually forms two narratives—and it is for the audience to believe in one of the two stories. 'Irrfan had to emotionally develop his character and also grasp, both the philosophical way of the narration and also the trickster kind of a narrator,' Ang says. And he adds, 'I told Irrfan that Pi is bullshitting. Because it is tricky to believe in either of the stories. And the question that is asked—'Which story do you prefer, not like?'—also makes one think.

Irrfan also had to match the innocence of the younger Pi, played by Suraj Sharma, and develop the cynical tone of an adult. 'People might believe this way or that way,' Ang says. 'It has to be right on the edge where it would work for everybody. You can have two versions of the story and they all can debate, make sense. That was the most difficult task, other than creating a tiger in the ocean digitally.'

When the film's shoot started, Irrfan went to Taiwan. But then Ang and his crew went off to shoot in India and returned to Taiwan to recreate the scenes of the lifeboat lost on the sea. Irrfan returned to Taiwan many months later to shoot the interior Montreal scenes. And later, the crew travelled to Montreal to wrap up the exterior scenes of the film. 'He had not seen what we had shot and he would not see it until a year later when the film was finished, because a lot of it was going to be digital,' Ang says. 'And even I didn't know how the digital scenes would shape up. I was just guessing. I told him what I had in my mind. I described the story, the pictures, how we were planning to shoot the rest of the film.'

Then came the key scene when Irrfan's Pi talked about the lifeboat landing on the stranded beach and an emaciated Richard Parker walking away without looking back to say goodbye to his boat mate.

'I was certain he was going to look back at me, flatten his ears to his head, growl,' Irrfan's Pi says in a voiceover, a long monologue, as he narrates his story to a writer, portraying Yann Martel, and played by the British actor Rafe Spall. 'That he would bring our relationship to an end in some way. But he just stared ahead into the jungle. (By now the camera is on Irrfan's face.) And then Richard Parker, my fierce companion, the terrible one who kept me alive, disappeared forever from my life.' Then he adds, 'I wept like a child. Not because I was overwhelmed having survived, although I was. I was

weeping because Richard Parker left me so unceremoniously. It broke my heart.'

In the final dialogue, the speech that wraps up the story, according to Ang Lee, Irrfan Khan's Pi says, 'You know, my father was right. Richard Parker never saw me as a friend. After all we had been through, he didn't even look back. But I have to believe there was more in his eyes than my reflections staring back at me. I know it. I felt it. Even if I can't prove it. You know I have left so much behind. My family, India, the zoo, Anandi (his teenage love). I suppose, in the end, the whole of life becomes an act of letting go. But what will always hurt the most is not taking a moment to say goodbye.' He goes on to say that he had never thanked his father without whose lessons he would not have survived in the sea. 'I know Richard Parker is a tiger, but I wish I had said, "It's over, we survived. Thank you for saving my life. I love you Richard Parker. You will always be with me. May god be with you."'

It is an emotionally devastating speech and Irrfan actually broke down, crying with tears rolling down his eyes, and it happened twice. Ang says he did not demand the tears from Irrfan. He simply explained the emotions, the background and how he felt thinking about the scene. 'With actors I just want to see the results,' he says. 'I don't care how they pull it off. What experience they use, they can keep that to themselves. But that was the effect I wanted, what the speech meant to me.'

Speaking to Hollywood.com, Irrfan emphasized how different this ending was to what usually happens in most films. 'Usually… you have a huge climax at the end. But this film does the opposite thing: he (Pi) is bringing the whole experience of the journey together and trying to assimilate it. You should be able to engage the audience so that it's the climax of the film. They should be emotionally charged when they're watching this piece.'[52] Irrfan described the dialogues and language in David Magee's screenplay as very precise, packed with layers of meaning. 'Trying to incorporate so many ideas into one line…it took time for me to identify with the language.'

In another interview, Irrfan talked about the universal aspect of the grief his Pi expresses. 'Ang told me that I should not voice personal grief, that my voice should become the voice of humanity,' he told *Hindustan Times*. 'That's what I tried to do in my performance.'[53]

Then there was the added burden when Ang Lee shot the scenes between Irrfan Khan and the writer twice. He first cast Tobey Maguire who had worked on two films with the director—*The Ice Storm* (1997) and *Ride with*

the Devil (1999). By the time *Life of Pi* was shot, Tobey had become a big Hollywood star, having acted in the first three *Spider-Man* films. After Tobey's scenes were shot with Irrfan, Ang felt that the American actor's star presence was overshadowing the narrative which should have focused on the Indian actor's heartbreaking speech. And so, a few months after he first shot the scenes with Tobey Maguire, Irrfan flew to Los Angeles to shoot the same sequences with Rafe Spall.

Ang does not like to talk about the casting change now, but at the time of the release of the film, this is what he said, 'I misjudged the situation. I underestimated the power of stars. I love Tobey. But it's a small part. So when it's a movie star sitting there, it captures attention. It didn't really work out.'[54] Irrfan, who thought the shooting was over for him, was surprised to get a call from the director to reshoot the scenes. 'I had deleted everything from my system,' Irrfan said. 'And to do it again, it needs a huge emotional investment.'

Irrfan also made light of the situation when he narrated this conversation he had with Ang Lee. 'I suddenly got a call from Ang Lee and he said, "We need to reshoot certain portions." I said, "Reshoot? Which portions?" He said, "All of it." So I said, "Ang. This is like you know I've just made love and you're saying come on, go on again." So he said, "Just imagine it's a new girl!"'[55]

Despite Irrfan's fine acting, Ang Lee had to struggle with one concern—that the Indian actor mumbles while saying long dialogues. But Irrfan is not alone, he says, adding, 'There are other great actors, Robert De Niro for instance, who mumble. It's not that I couldn't loop the voice. But it was a long dialogue so I just wanted to make sure that it was clear. He had to be understandable.'

There was also the concern about Irrfan's English accent. As the film progresses, Pi matures from the teenager on the lifeboat to an adult living in Montreal and how he speaks English also changes. The film's production team got a Montreal English accent coach for Irrfan. But despite the coaching, Irrfan's dialogues—emotionally moving as they are—sound like they are being spoken by a man who does not speak English with ease. At least one admirer of Irrfan was honest enough to say so.

'I was delighted he (Irrfan) got roles in Hollywood films,' Naseeruddin Shah says. But Naseer is known to be opinionated, calling a spade a spade. 'Only in *Life of Pi* I didn't care for his performance because he tried to put on

a Canadian accent and it didn't work. *Angrezi woh itni achee nahi bolta ke accent badal sake.* (He does not speak English well enough to change his accent.) That's what I told him and he accepted it.'

But Ang Lee will always be grateful to Irrfan for what he did in the film. 'I thank him for that. It's very inspiring for a lot of people around the world. His speech was a dream for a filmmaker. He should have been nominated. He should have gotten an award for that speech.'

Life of Pi was released in the US in November 2012 in time for the Oscar season. The film was nominated for 11 Oscars and it won four, including the second Best Director Oscar for Ang Lee. Irrfan failed to earn any nominations, although his performance was noticed by some critics. A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* called him 'reliably engaging', while Jenny McCarthy of *The Telegraph* wrote, 'Khan…conveys a kind of dreamy authority.'

As Irrfan's Hollywood résumé started to grow, he was asked about the key differences between the mainstream film industries in India and the US. For one, he had issues with the term 'Bollywood'. As he said in an interview with *The Guardian*, 'I always object to the word Bollywood. I don't think it's fair to have that name. Because that industry has its own technique, its own way of making films that has nothing to do with aping Hollywood. It originates in Parsi theatre.'[56]

Plus, he felt that Hollywood scripts created complex characters. 'In our cinema we don't really concentrate on complex behaviour,' he said to a member of an audience on an NDTV show.[57] 'There are no hidden layers. There is no complexity. It's flat. We used to have that kind of cinema in the '60s, before the '60s, but we got lost somewhere.'

In the Hollywood projects he had worked on, the story would be the nucleus, and everyone would work to serve the story. 'It's not the Tom Hanks image we are serving… Here (in India) we could have a very, very important character, but in the end he is going to serve the image of the star.'[58]

More Hollywood Adventures

The year 2012 ended well for Irrfan Khan's Hollywood adventures. Earlier in the summer of the same year he appeared in Hollywood's revival of the *Spider-Man* franchise—in director Marc Webb's *The Amazing Spider-Man*. While his fans in India were excited about this big break, Irrfan never made much of the role, and for a good reason. In three brief scenes in the film, Irrfan barely clocks in five to six minutes' screen time. In fact, Irrfan gets sixth billing in the film after Andrew Garfield, Emma Stone, Rhys Ifans, Dennis Leary and Campbell Scott (who also barely appears in the film). 'I don't want to watch this film, or talk about it!' Irrfan later told *Hindustan Times*.[59] It is said that his role as Dr Ranjit Ratha was cut down, although the reason for that is not clear.

When the film was released, his fans were mad, and many took to social media to ridicule the actor's decision to act in a huge Hollywood project despite his tiny role. This is what Jitesh Pillai, editor of *Filmfare*, said on Twitter, 'Just what exactly was irrfan khan (sic) doing in spiderman (sic)? Propagating the stereotype that Indians will only get fringe two-bit roles? Really now.'

Marc Webb still hoped to sell the film to Indian fans of one of the most successful Marvel franchises. So, he gave enough sound bytes to the press in India. 'I saw Irrfan in *The Namesake* and was completely beguiled.'[60] And earlier he said this to keep Irrfan's fans excited about the film. 'For Dr Ratha, I needed someone who projected sophistication, had a lot of strength and a very commanding presence, and Irrfan fit that bill. He is in the first half of the film and in several scenes.'[61] We now know the last sentence is false.

Despite the deceptive advertising, Columbia Pictures had high hopes about how the film would fare in the international box office. And so *The Amazing Spider-Man* was released one week ahead of the US opening in India and several other countries, including Germany, Russia, Japan, Philippines and Hong Kong. The film earned $758 million; nearly two-thirds of it came from foreign markets.

Since his outing in *Spider-Man*, Irrfan has acted in two other Hollywood franchises. In 2015 he acted in the Steven Spielberg film (the filmmaker is listed as an executive producer on the project), *Jurassic World*, the fourth in the series, launched by the legendary Hollywood director, starting with his humongous hit, *Jurassic Park* (1993). *Jurassic World*, like the previous films, was based on the characters created by the bestselling author, Michael Crichton.

In the film Irrfan plays Simon Masrani, a flamboyant businessman. He owns the fictional Caribbean island Isla Nublar-based amusement park called Jurassic World, and is reported to be the eighth-richest man in the world. He struts around in an expensive designer suit and shirt, and a newly-acquired American accent, or rather the kind of accent some Indians put on after having spent some time in the US. There are touches of grey in his hair, a lot more in the beard, and Irrfan looks terribly handsome in the film. Plus he has a longer role and a lot more to do in *Jurassic World*, including flying a helicopter. His heavy accent is troubling, but the filmmakers do not seem to care much about it. The film also stars the very good-looking French actor Omar Sy. At times Omar's English dialogues are even harder to understand. Clearly the filmmakers followed the Hollywood rule—a film with different foreign accents is bound to have a good international box office collection.

Although it repeats the key elements that made the franchise work in the first place, *Jurassic World* is full of thrills. However, at times it also gets very dialogue-heavy and rather dull. So there is a scene Irrfan's Simon Masrani is talking to Vincent D'Onofrio's Vic Hoskins, where he says, 'I intend to personally look into your project to determine its viability, within the moral principles of this company. What purpose can we have from a dinosaur when it can camouflage? It hid from hydro technology, how's that possible?' In scenes like this, one can tell that Irrfan's conviction is not in the character. Emotionally he is not invested in playing Simon Masrani. In any case, there is no character arc for Irrfan's Simon or any other actor. The film is made to provide adventure and excitement to the audience. It is not a film that will win any of the actors Oscar nominations.

Irrfan gets the tenth billing in the end credits of the film—after Chris Pratt, Bryce Dallas Howards, Vincent D'Onofrio, Omar Sy and playwright-actor B.D. Wong. But his end credit reads, 'AND IRRFAN KHAN', which is a special recognition for a supporting actor, a star with global recognition. The year was 2015 and by this time Irrfan was a familiar face in world cinema after the success of films like *The Namesake*, *Life of Pi* and *The Lunchbox*, all critical and box office hits.

Jurassic World was a huge hit—the sixth-most successful film of all time, grossing $1.7 billion worldwide, including $1 billion in the foreign markets. One could say the film put Irrfan in a different league than all of his colleagues in Hindi cinema, although it is also true that the success of *Jurassic World* had little to do with Irrfan being in the film or the character

he plays. But he was a part of the film and that detail will always be a part of his résumé.

For Irrfan there was an irony behind the sweet success of *Jurassic World*. The first *Jurassic Park* was released in 1993 when Irrfan was struggling financially while doing odd jobs for TV in Bombay. In an interview before the release of *Jurassic World*, this is what he said to *The Hollywood Reporter*, 'When the first *Jurassic Park* came out, I barely had the money to see it, and now I'm playing a part.'[62]

The next year, in 2016, Irrfan was back in one more Hollywood franchise, *Inferno*, based on Dan Brown's novel of the same name. Directed by Hollywood's A-list filmmaker, Ron Howard, *Inferno* is the sequel to *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels & Demons*, and is the third and final instalment of the Robert Langdon films. As in the other films, the character of Robert Langdon is played by Tom Hanks.

The film also has a large international cast—the British actress Felicity Jones, once again the French actor Omar Sy and a number of Italian and other European actors. Again the film blends a number of international accents, many not so easy to follow if you are only used to watching English-language films from Hollywood and the UK. Like it happened with *Jurassic World*, Irrfan is once again given an anglicized name, Harry Sims, but he speaks like an Indian and that is just a minor detail. It does not mean much in the larger plan of the film. Harry Sims is one of the villains in the film, has an ocean liner as his office and tries to spread a virus that would control the world's population. He dresses very well and eventually gets knifed in the film.

Coincidentally, Irrfan's characters are killed off in all these three big Hollywood productions. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* he dies when his car falls off the bridge, pushed down by a giant lizard. In *Jurassic World* he dies when his helicopter crashes after being attacked by giant dinosaur-like birds.

Tiffin Tales

A large part of Irrfan Khan's foray into Hollywood in the recent years has to do with the success of Ritesh Batra's first feature film, *The Lunchbox* (2013),

which screened in the International Critics' Week section at the Cannes Film Festival and won the Grand Golden Rail Award. The film was picked for US distribution by Sony Pictures Classics—the prestigious independent art house arm of Sony Pictures, and was a critical success.

The Lunchbox is a brilliant film with a universal appeal but it also did well because its key producers Guneet Monga and Anurag Kashyap roped in several other big names to be a part of the team, making the film one of the first international co-productions coming out of India. The film's long list of producers included names as diverse as Oscar-winning Bosnian filmmaker Danis Tanovic, Mira Nair's regular producer Lydia Dean Pilcher and even the Bollywood director, Karan Johar.

When Ritesh originally started to work on the script, he had Irrfan in mind to play the lead role of Saajan Fernandes, a lonely widower in his mid- to late-50s. Ritesh had seen Irrfan in *The Namesake* and *In Treatment*. But Ritesh did not know Irrfan. He recalls the time when he was in film school in New York and he saw Irrfan walking inside B&H Photo Video, a discount electronics store. But Ritesh did not have the courage to walk up to him to say hello.

'It was the way he carried himself and the work he had done in those two projects, I knew instinctively that if anyone could do this with a delicacy that it needed, it was Irrfan,' he says. 'And Irrfan has always had a searching quality. He always seems to be searching for something deeper.'

There was another quality to the Saajan character that Ritesh was creating in his writing. 'It was not a story of an old man,' he says. 'It was a story of someone who felt he was old.' Ritesh also adds that some inspiration of Saajan Fernandes's persona came from a classic Japanese film, *Ikiru* (1952). Saajan's general demeanour was inspired by the character Kanji Watanabe (Takashi Shimura) in Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece about an old bureaucrat dealing with the news that he has terminal cancer. From the way Saajan has his glasses perched on his nose, to his clothes and his walk with his shoulders drooping—much of that found its way in the script as Ritesh Batra kept Kanji Watanabe in his mind. There is *Ikiru* also in the production design of *The Lunchbox*. Kanji Watanabe's office in the early 1950s Japan looks so similar to Saajan's workspace in the Bombay of 2013—rows of desks cluttered with files, bored bureaucrats and clerks just about getting by each day.

In the heartbreakingly romantic film, with a heavy dose of humour blended in, Saajan, a middle-aged office clerk in Bombay, accidentally

receives a lunchbox that is meant for another person. The film emphasizes that the lunchbox delivery system in Bombay is foolproof. But the mistake is repeated every day and soon Saajan is exchanging handwritten messages with the woman who prepares the lunchbox—an unhappy housewife, Ila (played by Nimrat Kaur). An unexpected romance starts between the two characters who never meet, even though they know intimate details about each other's lives.

In this lunchbox and food-inspired romance, Ritesh also introduces a third character, Shaikh, an overeager clerk hired to replace Saajan who is about to retire. Shaikh, a hilarious, aggressive character who brings unsettling havoc in Saajan's life, is played by Nawazuddin Siddiqui. This was the fourth time Nawaz and Irrfan acted together in a film. Earlier they appeared in Amit Kumar's short, *The Bypass* (2003), and two features, *New York* (2009) and *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012). Shaikh becomes a balancing counterpoint to Saajan's brooding, near-depressed man.

Irrfan's loneliness in the film is heartbreaking, especially the scenes with the quiet cigarette breaks in his balcony as he watches a family across the street eating meals together. The film really captures the sadness of being single and lonely in big cities and Irrfan brings this urban malaise to life. There are many such scenes in the film, but the one that affected me the most, even after having seen *The Lunchbox* five times, is the shot of him in the bus, his bulging eyes showing so much pain.

Ritesh describes Irrfan as a very professional and generous actor. 'Even when we had to shoot over his shoulder looking at another character, or there is a hint of him in the shot, he always stood and did it himself. We never had a stand-in for him.'

Irrfan was also open to experimentation, improvisations and last-minute changes to the script. Ritesh Batra has the habit of constantly making changes to the script, but Irrfan was always ready for the surprises and last-minute challenges.

In the initial script, Irrfan's character was a hockey player when he was young. There was supposed to be a shot of him dribbling with a hockey stick in his balcony. Irrfan practised that a lot, and the film team even had a coach work with him. But on the day of shoot, when Ritesh arrived on the set, he noticed the film's production designer had placed a radio in Saajan's living room. And the radio had Ritesh make sudden changes to the script.

'I told him the hockey bit was maybe a bit too much,' Ritesh says. "Why

don’t you just sit and listen to the radio?” It wasn’t a surprise as long as we understood we were always trying to be honest and find something deeper. Just the act of him listening to the radio added to the tone of the story. I think we were both appreciative of the process that was organic. We were not there just to cover and shoot a script.’

‘He was always willing to try,’ he adds. ‘He asked me, “Are you sure?” And he suggested I should take a walk and come back. He said, “It’s your first film. You have written a great script. I think it is a great idea and if you want me to do it I will support it.”’

According to Ritesh, the toughest part for Irrfan was the scenes shot in his apartment. In many scenes Saajan is alone in his apartment. There were five or six days of shoot where Irrfan was all by himself. Some of the scenes did not make it in the final cut. The same was true for Nimrat Kaur, where often she would be alone in her apartment, cooking a meal for her husband, but without fail it would land on Saajan Fernandes’s desk. ‘That was probably hard for both of them,’ Ritesh says.

While he is shooting films, Ritesh has the habit of reading books that go with the tone and the mood of the film. While writing *The Lunchbox* he was also reading the novel *Norwegian Wood* by the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami. Then, during the shoot, Ritesh was surprised to learn that Irrfan was also reading a Murakami book.

‘He’s a real reader,’ Ritesh says. ‘On the set he was always with a book. And it was not a coincidence. It was about how smart he is. He could perceive from what we were doing and what the tone of the movie was going to be. I think books are very helpful in capturing the tone of the film, even more so than movies. In fact, I don’t want to be watching a movie while I am making one.’

Following the film’s premiere at Cannes, which was attended by Irrfan, his co-actors and Ritesh, *The Lunchbox* travelled to the Telluride Film Festival, and a week later, to the Toronto International Film Festival. At Telluride, the organizers had planned four screenings of the film. But *The Lunchbox* proved to be so popular that three more shows were added to satisfy the demands of the festival audience. And still some people were shut out. On the streets of Telluride, people stopped me and asked, ‘Are you from India? Did you see *The Lunchbox*? Wasn’t it lovely?’ I would constantly run into Americans who felt the need to talk to me about the film. The buzz was equally strong in Toronto.

In September 2013, all eyes were on the film which would qualify as India's official entry for the Foreign Language Oscar race. Anne Thompson, one of the most influential film journalists, said she hoped India would pick *The Lunchbox* as its official entry. 'I was rooting for India to submit Ritesh Batra's Sony Pictures Classics pick-up, *The Lunchbox*, a warm Mumbai romance starring Irrfan Khan that cut a swath on the festival circuit from Cannes to Telluride and Toronto… (It) had a real shot,' she wrote in *IndieWire*.[63] And Scott Feinberg, the columnist for *The Hollywood Reporter*, said *The Lunchbox* had a good chance of being among the five nominated foreign language films.[64]

Following the Toronto premiere of *The Lunchbox*, select guests were invited to a dinner at an Indian restaurant, The Host. I spoke to producer Danis Tanovic who told me he hoped *The Lunchbox* would be India's official entry. 'That should be India's choice, if India wants to win,' Tanovic said. Tanovic had won the 2002 Best Foreign Language Film Oscar for *No Man's Land* (his film beat *Lagaan* in that year's Oscar race). But Michael Barker, co-president and co-founder of Sony Pictures Classics, acknowledged at the same party that there would be all sorts of pressure on the committee that would select the Indian entry. 'There's politics in every country's selection process,' Michael said to me.

It is not clear what politics Michael Barker was suggesting, but the Film Federation of India (FFI), the body that selects India's official entry, eventually picked a Gujarati film, *The Good Road*, as India's Oscar entry. Few people had seen *The Good Road*. It had no name recognition among the members of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, though many of them had already seen *The Lunchbox* at one of the film festivals.

Many people were disappointed, shocked and angry. They questioned how the FFI expected the Academy members to connect with an unknown Indian film amidst the clutter of foreign language entries they had to watch. Some critics in India eventually went and saw *The Good Road* and were rather critical of the film. Even I watched it on a DVD and was quite shocked. The Gujarati film was made up of a series of unrelated incidents, with rather substandard acting and touches of exotic India that some Indian filmmakers seem to think works with the Western audience. *The Lunchbox*, in comparison, was a solid piece of filmmaking, a heartfelt ode to lonely people living in a large metropolis.

Ritesh Batra posted this tweet when the news was announced:

‘Heartbroken. We could have gone the distance we were told by our US distributors, by the Hollywood press…’ Two of the film’s producers, Anurag Kashyap and Karan Johar, also took to social media to express their frustration. And even Irrfan, one of the producers of the film, spoke out against the FFI’s decision. ‘Whatever the responsibility of the body is, they should have done a good job,’ Irrfan said in an interview. ‘I am just disappointed as it was a film with a new language and had the capacity to connect with the world audience. That film was unique in its own way.’[65] And later he added in another interview, ‘One should ask the jury members why they selected *The Good Road*. One should ask them what was so great about that film.’[66]

Some people remained bitter about the FFI’s decision for a while, and especially after *The Good Road* vanished in the Oscar race along with many other remarkable foreign language films. But Irrfan eventually moved on.

Whether it won awards or not, *The Lunchbox* remains a prime jewel in Irrfan’s acting crown. Even today, a film like *The Lunchbox* is remembered in the West not only for Irrfan’s performance but also because it brought the spotlight on Indian cinema, just as *Monsoon Wedding* did in 2001.

‘It makes me happy when people outside India recognize my work, because at some level I am also able to change their idea about our cinema,’ Irrfan said in an interview, as he addressed the impact of his non-Bollywood films.[67] ‘Our stories are getting more real, our audience is changing and the world should know about it.’

Solving the Puzzle

In June 2017 Irrfan Khan posted a series of photographs on Instagram where he was shown either walking on the streets of New York City or in the northern suburb of Yonkers. In one picture, a smiling Irrfan is wearing a kimono and standing on the side of one of Manhattan’s avenues. All of the pictures had a hashtag, #thepuzzle. It later became evident that Irrfan was acting in an indie film called *Puzzle* (2018).

Based on an Argentinian film, *Rompecabezas* (2009), *Puzzle* was directed

by Marc Turtletaub, better known as the producer of a range of American indies, from *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) to *Loving* (2016). A relatively small production, as compared to big Hollywood franchise films Irrfan had already acted in, *Puzzle* would be his first American indie.

Puzzle stars Scottish actress Kelly Macdonald, who plays the role of Agnes, a quiet housewife and a mother, bored with her life until she finds a purpose—she realizes she is very good at solving jigsaw puzzles. Irrfan plays Robert, a wealthy divorced man and Agnes's puzzle partner, who triggers this passion in her, and the two find a sense of peace in their complicated lives.

'Doing puzzles is a way to control the chaos,' Irrfan's Robert says in the film. 'When we complete it, that gives a perfect picture, our way to control the mess around us.'

It was the film's producer Peter Saraf who first thought of casting Irrfan in the film. 'Irrfan is one of those actors who immediately draws you in and you can't take your eyes off him,' Peter was quoted as saying in the film's programme notes. 'I thought about the scene where Agnes goes to meet the man who placed the personal ad for a puzzle partner. Wouldn't it be extraordinary if Irrfan Khan opens the door?'

Marc Turtletaub had seen Irrfan in his big Hollywood films and even in his more intimate work, like *The Lunchbox*. 'I thought that was a beautiful portrayal,' Marc says. He also remembered seeing Irrfan on the HBO show *In Treatment*. 'I consider him one of the world's great actors.' But when producer Peter Saraf approached to consider Irrfan Khan for the role of Robert, Marc was a bit hesitant. 'I wondered if he would consider coming all the way from India to do our small film. But Peter said, "We should try."' Finally the film's script was sent to India, and to Marc's surprise, Irrfan loved it.

While Irrfan was once again given an English name, the film was okay with casting an Indian actor with a pronounced accent that identified his ethnicity and national origin. 'The part was not written for an Indian or a Caucasian actor,' Marc says. 'We just wanted someone who is an incredible actor. So we didn't have a predisposition one way or the other.' And this colour-blind casting of Irrfan was a good sign. By now Irrfan had made his presence felt and Hollywood was willing to offer him roles that were not focused on the fact that he was an Indian actor.

Marc did not rehearse with his actors. He did not think his 'world-class' actors needed rehearsals. He said from the years of being a producer he had

learnt that it was good to let actors bring what they could without planning it in advance. There would always be room to make minor adjustments on the set. ‘People give me credit for their great performances,’ he says. ‘But I know the truth, that I was smart enough to get out of their way and to let them do what they do.’

‘I have learned over the years how important it is for the actors to not only find the words they want to say, but also where they want to say them and how they want to move on the set,’ he adds. ‘You have to allow them that freedom. Then they can relax and give you the best performance.’

There is one beautiful scene in the film where Kelly Macdonald’s Agnes wants to share a letter her son has written as part of his college application. Agnes is in the kitchen with Irrfan Khan’s Robert. Marc had earlier planned to have the two actors standing around the kitchen table when Robert gets closer to Agnes and asks whether he can kiss her. But then Irrfan suggested trying the scene sitting by the table. ‘It wasn’t my instinct at all, but I think it turned out to be a nicely done scene,’ Marc says. ‘The actors have to find the space where they are most comfortable.’

Sometimes during the shoot Marc would watch Irrfan prepare for his role or a shot. Normally the actor would be relaxed and comfortable, but every so often he would be quiet, giving the sense that he was thinking about how he wanted to play the next scene. Irrfan was very comfortable as Robert, and he would move a lot around the set. ‘It was often unexpected, the gestures he would make, when he would throw his hand up in the air, or a circular gesture,’ Marc says. ‘Like everyone watching, I would think, “Wow, where is he going to go with it?” And of course it ended up being the performance where you see an eccentric, wealthy, charismatic guy. I could never have predicted it until I saw it myself.’

Puzzle actually belongs to Kelly Macdonald since she is the main focus of the story, and in a way the film is a coming-of-age narrative of a woman who is over 40. To give the film a feminist feel, Marc and his producer hired a female editor, Catherine Haight. They wanted a woman’s perspective in editing the film. But when Marc saw the first cut of the film he was surprised to find it was mostly about Irrfan.

‘I asked, “Cate, what happened?”’ he says. ‘I thought she was trying to protect the female voice in the film. And she said, “Yes, but I fell in love with Irrfan.”’

Irrfan accompanied his director and the co-actors to the Sundance Film

Festival in January 2018. Speaking to *Deadline Hollywood,* he said the film's writing 'created a spell on me'. He was drawn to the project because of its simplicity, yet managing to contain complex elements of life. And then he added, 'I have been doing big studio franchise movies. So I was looking for a movie that was more intimate, more personal. Suddenly, out of the blue, this script came my way and I loved it and I thought I had to do it.'[68]

The reviews were mostly positive. Anne Hornaday of *The Washington Post* said that while the film belonged to Kelly Macdonald, but 'for his part, Irrfan Khan has seductive fun as Agnes's puzzle partner, who lives in a New York townhouse that is somehow opulent and barren at the same time'.[69] *The Guardian*'s Mike McCahill said Robert was played by 'a nicely understated Irrfan Khan'.[70]

Puzzle was the first American project Irrfan worked on where he had a solid supporting role. And he seemed to love working in the film. *Puzzle* opened in New York and Los Angeles in July 2018, before it also played in other American cities. The film's cast and the director spent time promoting the film. But Irrfan missed the film's promotion since he was in London getting treatment for neuroendocrine tumour.

Some Things Drop, Some Stay

As Irrfan's career in America was picking up, he sometimes had to make the difficult choice of whether to take a key project in India or a big Hollywood film. It happened a few times—the most significant was when he said 'no' to Ridley Scott's *The Martian* (2015). Instead, he opted for a charming, quiet love story—*Piku* (also released in 2015)—where he also got a chance to play the love interest (in the most un-Hindi film way) of Deepika Padukone, and co-star with Amitabh Bachchan.

'He was in two minds about what to do, and he kept asking me,' Shoojit Sircar, director of *Piku*, says, adding that the dates for the two films were the same. 'I was thinking, possibly for him, who is Shoojit Sircar? He's nobody as compared to a Hollywood director.'

Shoojit gave him the choice to select whatever he wanted to do. And all

the while Irrfan knew he could only do one film. Shoojit even offered to move his dates. But finally Irrfan said no to Ridley Scott. He obviously gave up a small but high-paying job. The role of Vincent Kapoor went to the British-Nigerian actor Chiwetel Ejifor. But Irrfan made the right choice, since *Piku* heralded the beginning of a string of romantic comedy Hindi films in which he would play the lead role.

Irrfan did meet with Ridley Scott and the director told him that he had seen *The Lunchbox*. Irrfan later told the press that this was the second time he had been offered a role by the Hollywood director and producer. The first project *Body of Lies* (2008) had Russell Crowe and Leonardo DiCaprio in the lead. But again Irrfan had to say no because the timing did not work out.

Irrfan also said no to Steven Spielberg one time. It was a chance for him to act as Scarlett Johansson's love interest. But he was concerned that the film did not offer enough acting opportunity to his character. Perhaps he was being careful after getting a miniscule role in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012).

The biggest regret Irrfan had was missing out on the Christopher Nolan film, *Interstellar* (2014). For the shoot, Irrfan was expected to stay in the US for four months at a stretch. He did try to work out the schedule. And he even thought of shuttling between India and the US. But that was not working out for the *Interstellar* team. And Irrfan was keen to stay in India to work on *The Lunchbox* (2013) and *D-Day* (2013). 'I don't have a tendency to regret what I do, but knowing it's a Christopher Nolan film, I can say that this has been one of the most difficult decisions I've made,' Irrfan would later say.[71]

There were also some other promising projects that never materialized. In the most important one Irrfan was approached by the British director Joe Wright (also husband to Anoushka Shankar) to play Jawaharlal Nehru. The film *Indian Summer*, based on Alex von Tunzelmann's book by the same name, focused on the final days of the British empire in India. The film was also supposed to explore the rumoured affair between Nehru and Edwina Mountbatten. Cate Blanchett would play Lady Mountbatten and Hugh Grant was offered the role of her husband, Lord Mountbatten. Everything spoke of this being a prestigious project, including that Joe Wright (*Pride & Prejudice*, 2005 and *Atonement*, 2007) would direct it. The film was scheduled to release in 2011.

Generations of Indian actors have dreamed of playing Jawaharlal Nehru or Mahatma Gandhi but only a few have had the opportunity. Naturally Irrfan

was excited about being cast in the role even when he had no physical resemblance to Nehru. He addressed that concern in an interview: 'I'll turn myself into the character through my attitude. When I was just out of NSD I had played Lenin (in the Russian play *Blue Horses on Red Grass*) at the age of 21. It made me realize my potential and direction as an actor,'[72] Irrfan said.

There were delays, the first of which was the Indian government's demand to approve the entire script. There was even a promise from the director that he would not show any kissing between Nehru and Edwina Mountbatten. But the film's budget shot up to an estimated amount of $30–$40 million. And finally the project was shelved. 'We were in between a rock and a hard place,' Joe Wright told *Variety*.[73] 'The Indian government wanted us to make less of the love story while the studio (Universal) wanted us to make more of the love story.'

Hugh Grant and Cate Blanchett would have moved on since they could focus on other Hollywood and western projects. But actors too are human beings and Irrfan Khan had just begun to get prime projects in the West. The cancellation of *Indian Summer* must have disappointed him hugely.

But Irrfan had learnt to move on, perhaps from the time when he had faced his first rejection for Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay*. It helped that he kept getting interesting as well as challenging projects, especially in India, that gave him grounds to redefine his image as well as have fun as an actor.

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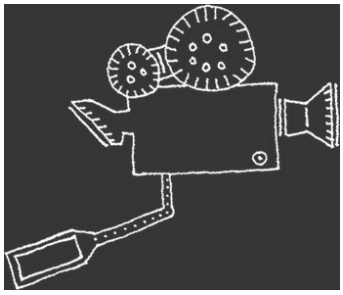
6

THE NEW CLASSIC FILMS: DEFYING BOUNDARIES AND LABELS



Ek baar to yun hoga, thoda sa sukoon hoga Na dil mein kasaq hogi, na sar mein junoon hoga.[74]

When Irrfan Khan's friend Tigmanshu Dhulia was assisting Shekhar Kapur on *Bandit Queen* (1994), he came across an article on the dacoit-turned-politician Phoolan Devi in the weekly magazine, *Sunday*, published by *Anandabazar Patrika*. It was a cover story, and inside, there was a reference to another dacoit, Paan Singh Tomar, who started his life as an Indian Army soldier. He was a seven-time national steeplechase champion, representing India in the Asian Games, but later, because of a family land dispute, he was forced to take up arms and become a notorious dacoit in the Chambal Valley.

Tishu knew at that time that one day, after he would become a director, he would make a film based on Paan Singh Tomar's life. He told Irrfan he would cast him in the lead role.

Years later, during the shoot of the film in Roorkee, Irrfan would tell *Time* magazine that he was drawn to the story of Paan Singh Tomar because it follows the hero once he has been forgotten. 'It talks about our system,' he says. 'It's a sign for any nation, any society—how much they are prepared to care for a talent.'[75]

The film *Paan Singh Tomar* took a long time to make. For one thing, Tishu realized that producers in India were not willing to invest in a full exploration of the story. 'This is not a story about Gandhi or Bhagat Singh where there is so much material out there,' he says. 'There isn't much written on Paan Singh Tomar and I would have to travel and research the subject. For that I needed some money, but no one was ready to support me.'

Eventually, the production house UTV stepped in and the film was released in March 2012, nearly 20 years after the first time Tigmanshu Dhulia had planned to make it. But the making of the film was overwrought with a series of problems. For one, the actual production started in 2009 when the global recession had set in. A healthy budget of the film that required period details including a recreation of a stadium in Tokyo was cut into half.

Everyone took a 50 per cent pay cut, and that included Irrfan Khan who, by then, was on the cusp of becoming a global star. But he accepted the situation, since *Paan Singh Tomar* was a dream project for him and his friend Tigmanshu Dhulia.

Irrfan modelled the Paan Singh character after his father. 'There are some roles which need models in front of you,' he told Anupam Kher.[76] 'I couldn't find anybody. But I had these images of him (his father). That really helped me. The way he walked, carried himself, that inspired me.'

'In a way *Paan Singh Tomar* was my tribute to my father,' he added.

Irrfan was 45 years old when the film was released and he did all the scenes of the races and steeplechase events himself. Tishu was ready to use a body double, yet Irrfan insisted on performing in all the scenes himself. 'Steeplechase was a very challenging event for Irrfan,' Tishu says. 'But Irrfan has been sporty from the beginning. He loves being outdoors. He loves going out of Bombay on location. Give him a kite in his hand and it is blissful for him.'

Despite a trainer working with him, Irrfan had an accident and he tore a ligament. 'There was no doctor where we were shooting in Chambal,' Tishu says. 'We couldn't figure out what to do.'

There is a scene towards the beginning of the film when Paan Singh is punished and asked to run rounds of a field holding his luggage above his head. He is wearing the army fatigue with heavy shoes. And unfortunately Irrfan had torn the ligament two days before that shoot. 'We actually didn't know what a ligament is,' Tishu adds. 'We thought it was a sprain.'

Paan Singh Tomar played at New York's South Asian International Film Festival in late 2011. A slightly modified version of the film, with a revised background score, was released in theatres in March 2012. I reviewed the film for Rediff.com.[77] Here is what I wrote at the start of my 3.5-star review:

> Towards the middle of Tigmanshu Dhulia's new film, *Paan Singh Tomar*, Irrfan Khan…stands in a corridor of an army barrack. He has just talked on the phone to his mentor, a major in the army, when a young orderly places a packet of ice cream in Tomar's hand (it will make sense upon viewing the film). Khan's Tomar is deeply moved by this gesture. With the camera on his partially lit and weathered face, he gives a wide smile, one hand wiping the tears flowing down his cheeks.

> It is a beautiful, moving moment in Dhulia's film. But the simple scene holds together because of Khan's performance, one of the best in his long career… Khan is a national treasure, a unique gifted Indian actor who uses his eyes, voice and other facial features to display the humour and then pathos in his characters.
>
> Khan is mesmerizing in the film—an innocent, naïve, charming athlete, a man with a clean heart, who later becomes an angry, menacing outlaw. The camera loves him and it is impossible to look away from the screen when the focus is on him.

There are many moments in *Paan Singh Tomar*, or, for that matter, in some of his other films, where Irrfan gives a side glance, a smile that lights up the entire screen. And the camera captures his charming smile. Tishu says that he never asks Irrfan to give a smile like that. But Irrfan knows he looks good when he gives the smile and so he improvises in many of his films.

'My approach with Irrfan is different, because we are close friends and we know each other rather well,' he says. 'I sometimes give him a reference of a life experience and he immediately understands. I can't do this with any other actor. Many of our actors are not well educated, but Irrfan—if you give him reference about life or a play—he gets it. He's a very observant actor.'

Paan Singh Tomar won many awards, including two National Film Awards—the Golden Lotus for the Best Feature Film (Tigmanshu Dhulia and Ronnie Screwvala) and the Silver Lotus for Best Actor (Irrfan Khan). So far that is the only time Irrfan has received a National Film Award.

Tishu and Irrfan worked together on one more film—*Saheb Biwi Aur Gangster Returns* (2013), the second part of the trilogy that Tishu had made. In each of the films, Jimmy Sheirgill plays the role of the Saheb, and Mahie Gill (who also played Irrfan's wife in *Paan Singh Tomar*) is the Biwi. The gangster character changes in each film. That was Irrfan's role in the second part. His character Indrajeet Singh belongs to old royalty but now his family does not have money. So he becomes a local goon, roaming around on a motorcycle in the small town. But he has the desire to become big, to get back the glory that his family once enjoyed.

Tishu says Indrajeet is one of the most complex characters he wrote, and especially so, since he knew Irrfan would be able to deliver what was required of the role. 'After part one was a success, Irrfan told me he liked it,' Tishu says. 'When part two was being planned, I told Irrfan, "I will make a

character who will be a different kind of a gangster and people will not ridicule him, but they will believe him." I couldn't depend on another actor to play that role.'

Despite Tishu's efforts to create a unique film, *Saheb Biwi Aur Gangster Returns* did not work. Jimmy Sheirgill and Mahie Gill brought credibility to their characters, but Irrfan did not add the emotional punch. It seemed like his heart was not in the film and he was nearly sleepwalking through the project. Plus there was no chemistry between him and Soha Ali Khan—11 years younger than Irrfan, who plays the new love interest to Jimmy Sheirgill's Aditya Pratap Singh, but also flirts with Irrfan's Indrajeet Singh. Age difference would not mean much if the two characters were engaged, connected. But here they looked quite uncomfortable with each other.

Tishu would like to believe otherwise, but *Saheb Biwi Aur Gangster Returns* is definitely not Irrfan's strongest work.

CUT!

It was during this period in his career that Irrfan Khan collaborated on single projects with some of the top film personalities in the Bombay film industry —from one of the biggest stars in the industry, Shah Rukh Khan, to an actor whose career had also emerged out of the theatre, Manoj Bajpayee, and veteran independent film voices such as Sudhir Mishra. The projects Irrfan selected did not fare well at the box office, but it gave him an opportunity to do work that interested him and added different dimensions to his already booming career.

While Shah Rukh and Irrfan started their acting careers in the same space, doing theatre in Delhi, the films they chose were of very different ethos, until the two acted in Priyadarshan's *Billu* (2009). *Billu* is a remake of the Malayalam film *Kadha Parayumbol* (2007), which also had a Tamil version, *Kuselan* (2008), starring Rajinikanth, and is the story of a big-time movie star and his friendship with a poor barber living in a village. Shah Rukh plays Sahir Khan, the movie star who comes to shoot a film in the village. While the film shoot generates a lot of interest in the village, there is

an equal amount of excitement happening in the household of Billu, the barber (Irrfan). For many years Billu has told his wife (Lara Dutta, looking like a glamorous star, but dressed to appear poor for the film) and children that Sahir is his childhood friend.

Most of *Billu* is an unreal film showing two extreme lives—that of a poor barber living in a Hindi film-defined world of poverty, and the arrival of a big superstar in a village where he performs three item numbers with Kareena Kapoor, Deepika Padukone and Priyanka Chopra. *Billu* was produced by Shah Rukh's Red Chillies Entertainment company. But the Sahir Khan strand of the film with the elaborate dance sequences with three of the top Hindi cinema actresses seemed like an afterthought, a desperate attempt to save a film that its makers seemed to think would not work without the presence of Shah Rukh Khan and the three actresses.

However, *Billu* is worth watching to see how much Irrfan is at ease performing comedy. There are several amusing moments in the film, such as when Irrfan tries to convince his kids that they cannot see Sahir or that he will first ask the star when he can bring his family to the shoot. Or when Billu says to his wife, '*Pati ko bachane ke liye patnio ko jhooth bolne mein punya milta hai* (A wife is blessed if she lies to save her husband).' There is even a hilarious moment when he places a phone call to Sahir's secretary. The secretary starts to get angry and yells at Billu, who pretends to be humouring him on the phone.

Towards the end of the film Sahir does visit Billu's small hut, and as expected, both men break down. The whole film builds up to this scene. Shah Rukh is somewhat controlled as compared to his loud emotional moments in other films, but Irrfan beats him hands down in bringing out the melodrama. In fact, Irrfan's tears feel real and his performance in the closing scene is quite moving.

In 2009, Irrfan also made a guest appearance in an action thriller, *Acid Factory*, directed by Suparn Verma and produced by Sanjay Gupta whose career has been packed with Hollywood-inspired (or even Korea-inspired) films. And it would be the only film Irrfan would act in with Manoj Bajpayee, and there, too, they had one scene together. It is quite surprising, given that the two actors started performing in theatre in Delhi, and their paths crossed many times. Their breakout films—*Satya* (1998) and *The Warrior* (2001) were made just three years apart. And yet, no filmmaker thought of a script where these two actors—among the finest in India—could

act together.

Acid Factory opens with a *Reservoir Dogs*-like situation. (Sanjay Gupta has already directed a *Reservoir Dogs*-inspired film, *Kaante*, in 2002.) A group of criminals find themselves in a gas factory and they seem to have lost their memory. One of them is a police officer who has infiltrated their gang, but he has also lost his memory after being exposed to the gas. Suparn and Sanjay cast a range of young and senior actors to play the criminals—Fardeen Khan, Danny Denzongpa, Manoj Bajpayee, Aftab Shivdasani, Dino Morea, Dia Mirza and Irrfan Khan.

The film is set in South Africa where all the exterior scenes were shot. Irrfan's wife and sons also joined him in South Africa. The interiors, the gas factory, were shot in a studio in Hyderabad. According to Suparn Verma, Irrfan was drawn to the role since his character is a larger-than-life criminal called Kaiser who wears flashy suits and he gets to ride on yachts and in limousines, dealing with money. Irrfan was excited about the fact that until that time, no other Indian filmmaker had thought of casting him as a cool, slick criminal. He had played intense and demanding criminal roles, but at all times he was a more rooted, raw, visceral character.

Suparn feels that Manoj Bajpayee and Irrfan Khan had a good camaraderie on the screen. 'Both Irrfan and Manoj came from a place of absolute security and love for the craft, comfortable with their positions in the industry and what they love to do,' Suparn says. 'They both were anchored people in their lives also. Irrfan had insane success by then. Manoj also had seen success. So there was not much they had to prove.'

Acid Factory was a box office failure, but none of that mattered to Irrfan. He worked on the project for fun and to be able to work with the eclectic list of actors.

'Irrfan had a blast and so did the rest of the cast, and they loved working on the project,' Suparn says. 'Yes, we were making a commercial film. We were not making a film that would go to the Oscars, but at least there was that moment and everyone was true in that moment.'

An Act of Sharing

Sudhir Mishra remembers the first time he met Irrfan Khan. It was in 1987 and Sudhir's first film, *Yeh Woh Manzil To Nahi* (1986), was showing as part of the Indian Panorama at the International Film Festival of India. And Ram Gopal Bajaj, who was teaching at NSD, took the entire class that was going to graduate in the summer to Delhi's Uphaar Cinema for the film's screening.

'I was a 27-year-old guy, and it was flattering for a young filmmaker to have the entire NSD class come for the screening,' Sudhir says. He adds that he later saw Irrfan act in an NSD production. After Irrfan moved to Bombay he became a part of the struggling actors and filmmakers who would hang out at Sudhir's office. 'They were seeking work, ideas or they would show up just for a cup of tea,' he says. 'My office was the only office they could come to where the director was from theatre, so there were some reference points and they could engage in conversations.'

There was talk about Irrfan working in a Sudhir Mishra film, but it would not happen until the director's tenth film, *Yeh Saali Zindagi* (2011), made long after his iconic films *Is Raat Ki Subah Nahi* (1996), *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi* (2003) and *Khoya Khoya Chand* (2007). By 2011, Irrfan had already established himself as a major actor in India. But he was willing to take on smaller projects with lesser known actors such as Arunoday Singh, Chitrangada Singh and his friend Aditya Bhattacharya who had directed him in *Dubai Return* and then advised him during the shoot of *In Treatment*. On paper, *Yeh Saali Zindagi* looked like a fun project and then it was finally an opportunity for Irrfan to work with Sudhir Mishra.

From Sudhir's point of view, Irrfan was often getting cast in roles of criminals. But *Yeh Saali Zindagi* was a lighter film, even though it also dealt with gangsters. The film has several hilarious moments, such as one scene where Aditya's Roger is lying dead in an open casket and Priti (Chitrangada) and Arun (Irrfan) walk close to the coffin to get the dead man's thumb impression on a power of attorney paper. Arun keeps reminding Priti to cry a bit while they also struggle to straighten the corpse's thumb.

Sudhir's favourite scene with Irrfan is the opening sequence, which is repeated in the end, when a bullet ricochets and suddenly hits Irrfan. For a brief moment he does not realize he has been hit and then he suddenly notices there is blood on his shoe. Sudhir says the scene was written in the script but Irrfan's reaction, the look of disbelief that it was over for him, was all his doing.

'The best thing about Irrfan is that he is confident and he knows he is a

good actor,' Sudhir says. 'He pretty much knows, after discussing with the director, how he will do the scene. But what he is very interested in is how the scene and his part in that scene impact the film overall. He's very interested in making the whole scene work with the co-actors. He understands that making a scene work involves an act of sharing, and it is not a wrestling match.'

Sudhir recalls Irrfan's method. During the shoot, Irrfan talks to the director and the co-stars, reads the script and then surprises the director with his act. 'It's a revelation to you sometimes,' Sudhir says. 'But whatever he does, it is always within the boundaries of the script.' Also, on the set, Irrfan is never trying to achieve personal glory and appreciation, Sudhir adds. It is only when people watch the entire film that they realize he has carried the narrative on his shoulders.

Sudhir has worked with great actors—many of whom started their careers in the 1970s, with directors such as Shyam Benegal, and he has followed the new talents as well.

'He's an outstanding actor,' Sudhir says about Irrfan. 'He's up there with the best. These are different times, scripts and directors. But he is at par with Naseer, Om, Shabana, Smita, Pankaj. If any actor belongs to that group, it is Irrfan.'

Playing a RAW Agent

One of Irrfan Khan's strongest performances in this period was in a film that few people watched—director Nikkhil Advani's *D-Day* (2013), the story about Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) agents and their attempts to kidnap and bring a Dawood Ibrahim-like character (a terrific Rishi Kapoor) out of Pakistan. Opening with one of the best-edited sequences (a 14-minute scene, which took four months to edit) in recent Hindi films, *D-Day* also starred Arjun Rampal and Huma Qureshi. But when Nikkhil and his co-writer Ritesh Shah pitched the film to Irrfan, the actor was reluctant.

Until then Nikkhil Advani was best known for his hit Karan Johar production, *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003). And Irrfan was not convinced that the

director of a soulful romantic film could deliver an intense thriller. And so Nikkhil had to take another step to convince Irrfan. A meeting was arranged with Anurag Kashyap at his office. Anurag, who was in the midst of post-production of *Gangs of Wasseypur*, had read the script of *D-Day*. Plus Nikkhil Advani's reputation went all the way back to 1996 when he had co-written the tight script for the Sudhir Mishra film, *Is Raat Ki Subah Nahi*.

While he had never worked with Irrfan in a film (there was a brief project for television—a series called *Darr*), Anurag's word and his stature as the leading figure in India's indie film movement was enough to convince Irrfan to accept the role of Wali Khan.

Irrfan's Wali Khan is a RAW agent who is sent to Pakistan to set up an operation that would finally bring Dawood, referred to as Goldman in this film, back to India. Wali has lived in Pakistan for a few years, and he has established a base there, including a wife and a kid, who have no idea about his origins and his mission.

To Nikkhil Advani, *D-Day*, despite its impressive action sequences, is not an espionage thriller. 'To me, *D-Day* is the story of a guy (Wali Khan) who has lied to his wife and his child. It's a father and son's story. And it's a story of Arjun's character (Rudra Pratap) who is a trained killer who gets emotional and invested in the story when the prostitute he starts to love dies.' Shruti Haasan plays the prostitute who is given no name, although there is a lot of warmth and emotional tone to her character. And the best song from the film, 'Alvida', is picturized on Shruti as she is violently killed by Bhanja (Chandan Roy Sanyal).

To make Wali's marriage and his duplicitous life in Pakistan seem authentic, Irrfan insisted that Nikkhil should cast an unknown actress as his wife. He felt an actress like Tabu or Rani Mukerji (both were considered for the role) would make Wali Khan's secret life unreal. And so the film's casting agent Mukesh Chhabra and his team found a relatively unknown actress from Lucknow, Shriswara, to play Nafiza, who Wali Khan starts to love. Fearing that her life could be in danger, he even arranges for her to leave the country.

The very first day of *D-Day*'s shoot was held in Ahmedabad's Muslim neighbourhood, Juhapura. It was a delicate scene where Irrfan woke up in the morning and looked at his wife. After Nikkhil had explained the scene to Irrfan, the actor went and talked to the director of photography, Tushar Kanti Ray. Irrfan said he had understood what was required of him as an actor, but

he warned Tushar that he was capable of doing the unexpected. The camera should be prepared for any improvisations Irrfan would make. And so it became one of the best working relationships for Nikkhil Advani, where he, Irrfan and Tushar were in sync with each other.

'Nobody can direct Irrfan,' Nikkhil says. 'He would listen to me, my idea of the graph of the actor, but he would also change with every take. He wants to give you enough material with every take which you can use.'

D-Day is full of special moments where Irrfan Khan flexes his wonderful acting muscles, like the time when he steps inside a mosque to pray; or a seductive scene between Wali and his wife Nafiza early on in the film; or his angry outburst when he speaks to a RAW agent in India who wants to call an end to a mission in which Wali has invested many years of planning. Then there is the moment when Wali brings his wife and son to the airport, knowing he won't see them again. He calls out to the boy, saying his name, 'Kabir', and the kid responds by waving, saying, 'Abbu, Allah Hafiz.' Wali stands at the entrance to the airport. So much is going through his mind, including the fact that he is about to get involved in a complicated mission. Irrfan just leans against a wall and wipes his mouth with his hand. Later Irrfan is equally brilliant when he starts to talk to his son, who is now in police custody. He promises his son he will come to fetch him with a tragic smile on his face since he is forced to lie to the little boy.

D-Day's screenplay is a tad bit flawed and it gets somewhat jumbled, but the film is technically well crafted, with a brilliant display of acting talent from the likes of Rishi Kapoor, Arjun Rampal, Huma Qureshi and, of course, Irrfan. But it is really unfortunate that a thriller like this did not find its audience. *D-Day* did moderate business at the box office.

It was during the making of *D-Day* that filmmaker Raja Menon approached Irrfan for the lead role in *Airlift* (2016). Irrfan was at the Sofitel Hotel in Bombay's Bandra Kurla Complex area where the scene to capture Rishi Kapoor's character was being shot. Since Nikkhil Advani was producing *Airlift* as well, he arranged for the meeting. Irrfan heard the narration and then he spoke in private with Nikkhil. 'He said to me, "*Bahut achee script hai* (The script is very good)," Nikkhil recalls. "*Lekin kya hai ki aapko budget nahi milegi agar main act karoonga toh* (But if I act in it you will not get the budget that you need). My shoulders are too small for this role. I can't carry this film. It needs a big star."' Irrfan's understanding of the film business was impressive and he was willing to give up a big action film

that was being offered to him. Finally Nikkhil and Raja cast Akshay Kumar in the lead for *Airlift*.

Musafir Hun Yaaron

Seven years after Vishal Bhardwaj cast Irrfan Khan in his iconic film, *Maqbool*, the director would once again work with his favourite actor—this time in a Priyanka Chopra vehicle, *7 Khoon Maaf*, with a range of other actors, each playing one of the seven husbands of the film's protagonist, Susanna Anna-Marie Johannes. The actors Vishal cast in the film included Naseeruddin Shah, John Abraham, Neil Nitin Mukesh, Annu Kapoor and, of course, Irrfan.

In one of the toughest roles Priyanka Chopra played in her career, and one she perhaps did not deliver to perfection, her Susanna Anna-Marie Johannes is a young woman in Goa who murders her six husbands without ever drawing much attention from the police. Vishal based the film on a short story, *Susanna's Seven Husbands*, by Ruskin Bond (his second collaboration with the author after *The Blue Umbrella*, 2005).

Irrfan Khan plays Susanna's third husband, a Kashmiri poet Wasiullah Khan, aka Musafir, dressed in a long black sherwani and a Kashmiri hat, and is initially introduced to us reciting Gulzar's Urdu poetry, *Ek baar to yun hoga, thoda sa sukoon hoga/Na dil mein kasaq hogi, na sar mein junoon hoga* (One day it will be like this, there will be a moment of slight peace/ There will be no recurring pain, nor will there be madness in my head).

To please Wasiullah, Susanna converts to Islam and changes her name to Sultana Wasiullah Khan. There are some lovely delicate moments in the scenes between the two—as they walk through gardens with fountains in Srinagar, take a shikara trip on the Dal Lake, visit mosques or in the corridors and classrooms of a university where Wasiullah teaches, while Vishal Bhardwaj sings 'Bekaraan', also set to Gulzar's lyrics. But Vishal also intersperses moments between the couple with images of unrest and protests in Kashmir.

Irrfan is so delicate—almost effeminate in his gestures, and he looks so

regal in the Muslim attire that I wonder why no other filmmaker offered him the role of a poet. Even Priyanka looks gorgeous in colourful dupattas covering her head.

But then Wasiullah suddenly changes colour. From a gentle poet, he becomes an abusive, wife-beating beast when the two engage in sex. It was a tough scene to shoot, with Vishal only concerned about how Priyanka would perform that scene. 'Irrfan comes from theatre, he could transform into a monster, but Priyanka has no theatre background,' Vishal says. 'She was very afraid of how she would react to the physical abuse. I told her, first drop all your inhibitions. Think like a master. Don't think otherwise. I told her that she should consider herself an ustad like Meryl Streep in Irrfan's presence.'

Vishal had told Irrfan that Wasiullah had to be 'soft, that he could not ever hurt a flower'.[78] But then Irrfan also found the transformation in his character confusing, and it was tough for him to perform the role of an abuser, hitting and slapping Priyanka's character while they are engaged in lovemaking. 'I kept asking Vishal, *ki isme kya hai* (What is in it)?' Irrfan told *Forbes India* in an interview.[79] Then just before the scene was about to be shot, Irrfan heard a ghazal by Abida Parveen and that helped him 'find the contradictions, complexities and compulsions' in Wasiullah Khan. 'There was no connection between the ghazal and the character. It was just a trigger,' he added.

Irrfan's performance earned him a lot of praise; the most important one was from Gulzar himself. 'I think Irrfan is brilliant in the film,' Gulzar said. 'He's done very well, has completely got into the skin of his character.'[80]

The Conjuror

In 2014 Vishal Bhardwaj was back with his third Shakespearean tragedy, *Haider*, his take on Hamlet, set amidst the conflict in Kashmir. The first two films were *Maqbool* (*Macbeth*) and *Omkara* (*Othello*). And to get the true voice of the region, Vishal commissioned Kashmiri journalist Basharat Peer (author of the book *Curfewed Nights*) to write the film's script. With minor changes to bring in the politics of Kashmir, the gorgeously shot *Haider* is

essentially the story of a young Kashmiri man, played by Shahid Kapoor, a student at Aligarh Muslim University, who learns about his uncle Khurram's deceit and his siding with the government forces to kill his father, Hilal, a doctor who has treated militants.

Haider gets the information about his father's death and the name of the man responsible for it from a mysterious figure, Roohdaar (a terrific Irrfan Khan), who had spent time with Hilal in the prison and torture chambers. Roohdaar's entry is one of the wonders of Vishal's film. He's a mysterious figure who limps his way—first, out of focus, and then, slowly appears clearly in front of us, wearing a large white phiran, a huge beige-coloured shawl, dark glasses and a black Kashmiri hat. And this is accompanied with a background score—almost like the theme of Roohdaar.

Unlike in the play, Roohdaar is not exactly the ghost of Haider's father. But in a crucial scene when Arshiya (Shraddha Kapoor, playing Ophelia) asks Roohdaar if he is a doctor, the mysterious man responds by saying, '*Main doctor ki rooh hoon* (I am the soul of a doctor).' In the jail, Roohdaar is often tied up and tortured next to Hilal. '*Aap jism hain, aur main rooh* (You are the body and I am the soul),' Roohdar says at one point to the doctor. And then Roohdaar says one of the often-repeated dialogues from the film: *'Darya bhi main, darakht bhi main. Jhelum bhi main, chinar bhi main. Dair bhi hoon, haram bhi hoon. Shia bhi hoon, Sunni bhi hoon. Main hoon pandit. Main tha, main hoon aur main hi rahoonga* **(**I am the river and the tree. I am Jhelum and I am chinar. I am the temple, I am the sin. I am Shia, I am Sunni, I am a pandit. I was there, I am here and I will be there).'

In an interview, Vishal recalled one winter night of the film's shoot, when Irrfan's Roohdaar was going to stay awake in the torture chamber, as other prisoners slept around him. It was -14°C, and as the lights and the camera were being set up, Irrfan quietly went and positioned himself in one part of the room. Vishal had not decided where Irrfan was going to sit, but he decided to go along with the space the actor had chosen. 'Minutes after he'd settled in, a strange energy engulfed the torture chamber,'[81] Vishal said. 'We realized Irrfan is in the middle of the performance. Slowly, everybody took their spots without disturbing him in his element. We rolled the camera and got the shot, and only then did he come out of that trance-like state.'

As expected, Irrfan's role is small in the film—although he does have more screen time than Shakespeare gave to the ghost in his play. By 2014, Irrfan was comfortable as an actor, in India and Hollywood, and also true to

his theatre training, he was not always concerned about playing the lead character in a film. Vishal Bhardwaj and Irrfan had been friends for more than a decade. Irrfan definitely owed a lot to Vishal for the opportunity to act in *Maqbool*. And so he gladly played the role of Roohdaar in *Haider*. He actually enjoyed his special moments, his chance to shine amidst a large ensemble cast that included Tabu, K.K. Menon, Shahid Kapoor and Shraddha Kapoor.

According to Vishal, Irrfan's method of approaching a film sets him apart from his contemporaries. 'It's his ability to understand the script as a whole and not just his part,' Vishal told *HuffPost India*.[82] 'I've seen actors who crib about their screen time, length of dialogues, etc. Not him. For him, it doesn't matter how long or short the part is. He responds to the holistic grammar of the film, not just a part of it.'

However, true to the nature of the way Hindi film actors think and work, Irrfan reportedly asked Vishal Bhardwaj not to include him in *Haider*'s promotion. *India Today* quoted the actor as saying, 'I have a guest appearance in *Haider*. I did it because I love Vishal's work. And I wanted to be part of another Shakespearean adaptation by Vishal after *Maqbool*.'[83]

His guest appearance in Haider won Irrfan a lot of accolades from critics and others. Naseeruddin Shah—a strong observer of the Hindi film industry, and especially Irrfan's career—had this to say about the actor: 'I think he (Irrfan) and Tabu were the best thing in *Haider*.'

A Qissa, Told by Irrfan

Geneva-based filmmaker Anup Singh first got to know Irrfan Khan when he and ex-wife Mita Vashisht (Irrfan's classmate from NSD) worked on a few television shows. But Anup and Irrfan truly collaborated years later, when the director cast the actor in two films—*Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost* (2013) and then *The Song of Scorpions* (2017).

Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost, shot in Punjabi, is a post-Partition tale of loss and displacement told from the perspective of a Sikh refugee. Irrfan plays Umber Singh, who had witnessed a lot of violence during Partition.

Now living in a new home in the newly independent India, Umber is obsessed with having a boy. But when his wife Meher (Tisca Chopra) gives birth to a fourth daughter, he decides to raise her, Kanwar, as a son, ultimately even getting her (Tillotama Shome) married off to another young girl, Neeli (Rasika Dugal). The film takes on a real dark tone as it progresses.

The first time I watched the film, Irrfan's Umber Singh came across as a difficult and unsympathetic character. But subsequent viewings have made me feel the deep pain of all the characters that Anup Singh created. The image of the lonely Umber Singh now haunts me, and a lot of credit for that goes to Irrfan's performance. Wearing a turban and a long beard, Irrfan's affecting performance, enhanced by his voice and his probing eyes, speak volumes about the tragedies the man has endured.

There are so many memorable scenes with Irrfan in *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost*, especially the moment he dances in a trance. With a haunting score by French composer Béatrice Thiriet, *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost* introduces the audience to a quieter, gentler and yet angry Irrfan, whose character is so wrong and he ends up messing up so many lives. But there is no way back from what he sets in motion. His ghost seems so tragic and lonely.

When Anup Singh first approached Irrfan for the role, the actor was quite taken by the story, but then he was reluctant to accept the job. 'He said it's too dark a role for him to get into at this moment in his life and he said he would not do it,' Anup says. 'So, of course, I was completely destroyed, and I left.' But after thinking a lot about their conversation, Anup called Irrfan and told him that the actor's decision was wrong. So the two friends met again.

'I said, "One of the singers you like very much is Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan,"' Anup recalls. '"When you watch him sing, you see how his face contorts. Sometimes it's a terrible face, his eyes turned skyward, the teeth glinting, his muscles contorted. It looks like a dark moment. However, the voice that comes out of him is the most beautiful voice that we have heard. What is coming out of him is the love that he can't express, otherwise. That is how I see the character in *Qissa*."' With that, Irrfan Khan was convinced about playing the lead role in *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost*.

Two of the film's lead performers, Tisca Chopra and Rasika Dugal, are Punjabi, but Punjabi was not an easy language for Tillotama Shome and the Rajasthan-born Irrfan Khan. So both Tillotama and Irrfan went through intense Punjabi lessons, which lasted a few months.

One day, during the shoot, Anup Singh realized Irrfan was softly humming and singing to himself. Anup asked him what he was singing. “Oh I am singing the dialogue,” he told me,’ Anup says. ‘He said, “When I sing the dialogue, I am trying to find out not only the rhythm of dialogue, but sometimes I find the melody. What I want to perform is the inner world of what I am trying to say. And what I can’t say with words, it is the music of the dialogues, of the words that will say what the character cannot say.” This was how he learnt and spoke Punjabi.’

Anup does not believe the film’s negative tone had an emotional impact on Irrfan. Perhaps it had to do with the fact that Irrfan was surrounded by a large film crew. But even then the actor experienced excruciating back pain during the shoot. But he never once complained to Anup. The director only realized when he saw a couple of people carrying Irrfan after a shot.

‘We were working with a very controlled budget,’ Anup says. ‘But he never told me he was in such pain during the shoot. Sometimes I would take a shot, I would ask him to stand for as long as 20 minutes. And he would just stand there. His dedication, his support to a director is something really heartwarming.’

So it was natural for Anup to cast Irrfan again in his next film, *The Song of Scorpions* (2017). The new film had a dream cast—the Iranian actress Golshifteh Farahani (who spoke her own Hindi dialogues), Irrfan, Waheeda Rahman, Shashank Arora and Tillotama Shome in a small role.

Irrfan again played a dark role, of a man, Aadam, so obsessed with a woman that he has his friend rape her, so that he himself can come across as a caring man. The broken-down woman, Nooran (Golshifteh), left to fend for herself in the village, then marries Aadam in desperation. The marriage works for some time and there is even a beautiful seduction scene between Golshifteh and Irrfan.

It must be noted that by 2017 Irrfan was at the top of his game in India and even in Hollywood, so playing a dark character did not bother him. He was confident that a role like in *The Song of Scorpions* would not impact his image. ‘He only cares about roles that will reveal to him aspects of himself that he doesn’t know,’ Anup says. ‘As he says often, why would I play the same role again and again? How does that make me an actor? It just makes me into a robot.’

While promoting *The Song of Scorpions* at the Dubai International Film Festival, Irrfan and Anup spoke to *Variety* about their working relationship.

‘Working with Irrfan is working with someone who doesn’t have any mask, when it comes to work,’ Anup said.[84] ‘There is no moment when you feel that he is pretending to be something… We communicate without gossiping. We talk about our work and there are a lot of silences between us. Sometimes a glance is enough to lead us in a certain direction… We allow our fragilities and vulnerabilities to be open.’

Irrfan added that Anup’s way of working is that he gives space to actors to develop their own stories. ‘While working, it gives me a lot of scope to experiment,’ he said. ‘I chose not to read the scenes before I went on the set. I wanted to see what comes then and there… You are not structured. You can play around.’

Anup later says that Irrfan had started to trust the director so much so that he would not invest much time in preparing for any scene, other than to memorize the dialogues. Otherwise he would give himself entirely to the filmmaker, and the process would come about organically.

All of *The Song of Scorpions* was shot on outdoor locations in the Thar Desert in Rajasthan. But despite the heat, Irrfan was happy being outdoors. Sometimes, during the shoot, the crew would notice that Irrfan would be missing. But they only had to look up in the sky. If there was a kite flying, then certainly Irrfan was the one holding the kite’s string. Anup believes flying kites is also a metaphor for Irrfan’s acting.

‘For the actor Irrfan the character is like the kite in the sky,’ Anup says. ‘He holds the string, but how much can he control it, because you never know the winds. There are other kites in the sky. There are trees, electric wires. Any burst of wind could smash the kite.’

So any slight development in the environment can impact how Irrfan acts in any scene. Anup recalls that during one shot of *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost*, a leaf fell on Irrfan’s shoulder. ‘He noticed it and he paused,’ Anup says. ‘His whole rhythm changed.’

Seeking More Challenges

When Anup Singh was working with Irrfan on *The Song of Scorpions*, he

received an email from a Bangladeshi filmmaker, Mostofa Sarwar Farooki, who was looking for someone to introduce him to Irrfan Khan for a Bengali film, *No Bed of Roses* (*Doob* in Bengali). Mostofa had written a script about a middle-aged Bangladeshi filmmaker who leaves his wife of many years and moves in with a young actress who is his daughter's childhood friend.

It was a complex role, but while writing the script, Mostofa could only see Irrfan's eyes. 'The beauty of the character is he's very strong from the outside, but if you look deep down, he's a very fragile soul,' Mostofa says. 'I needed someone whose eyes would carry those two opposite emotions. If the audience took a closer look, and especially into his eyes, they would discover a fragile man within the cover of the strong man.'

Irrfan finally came on board, after a few mishaps, including the incident when Mostofa first wrote to Anup Singh, he forgot to attach the film's script to the email. And he waited for weeks wondering why there had been no response. Once Irrfan read the script, he watched a couple of Mostofa's films on YouTube—pirated versions of the director's dark comedies, without subtitles. And even though Sutapa Sikdar is Bengali, Irrfan watched the films on his own. 'Later he told me he was falling off the bed laughing,' Mostofa said. 'His wife asked, "How are you following this?" and he responded he didn't need to understand the language.'

Irrfan was so attracted to the script that he even agreed to lend his name as a producer of the film with the hope that it would help raise money for the production. 'He was there more as a co-producer,' Mostofa adds. 'He made sure that the film would get made.'

The real challenge was to make Irrfan speak with a perfect Bengali accent, and for that Mostofa had a long Skype chat with the actor where he read the entire script in Bengali, although it was written in English. While the production team had a Bengali coach on the set, Irrfan mostly relied on the recording he had made of Mustofa reading the script in Bengali.

No Bed of Roses (2017) is a heartbreaking story and no one emerges a winner in it. While Irrfan's character Javed Hasan appears as a villain—at least in the beginning—since he leaves his wife and daughter for a younger woman, under Mostofa's able guidance this one step leaves everybody rattled, including Javed's new wife.

And while we know that Javed has not been good to his family, Irrfan brings so much humanity to the character that our heart still breaks for him. The phone call he makes to his son and daughter after he has left home is a

tough scene to watch. But more emotional is the scene when he stands by his son and asks him to tell his friends that his father is a bad guy. Irrfan then breaks down. It is so deeply sad, even when we do not like Javed in the film.

'I always identify myself with the losers, with the people who are defeated and suffering,' the director says. 'That's why in *No Bed of Roses* I even start to care for the second wife when she starts to suffer.'

Irrfan spent 35 days in Dhaka shooting the film, but he also made time to relax in between the shoot. The house where Javed moves to after he leaves his family was next to a large field, and often the film's crew would start to play a makeshift game of cricket.

That was Mostofa's most special memory of the shoot. Irrfan would play as an all-rounder, but he hated to lose. 'He would be like a child,' the director says, laughing. 'And then he cheated in the game. He doesn't like to be out, so he would always come up with an excuse, saying, "Oh no, this is a no-ball."'

No Bed For Roses was Bangladesh's official entry for the Foreign Language Oscar.

A film like *No Bed of Roses* was the exact kind of challenge Irrfan Khan the actor wanted in his life—a film in a language he was not comfortable with, a character quite unlike any he had played and the chance to act in another country. It was a perfect fit, as Irrfan was seeking more such challenges in India as well, including trying romantic comedies. He would largely go on to succeed in that genre of cinema as well.

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[74]Urdu Lines by Gulzar, from Vishal Bhardwaj's 2011 Film 7 *Khoon Maaf* (One day it will be like this, there will be a moment of slight peace/ There will be no recurring pain, nor will there be madness in my head).

[75]'Keeping It Real', *Time*, 15 February 2010

[76]*Kuch Bhi Ho Sakta Hai*, Season 2, Episode 5, 30 August 2015, https://www.voot.com/shows/the-anupam-kher-show-s02/2/383623/the-warrior/383780

[77]'*Paan Singh Tomar* Is Compelling', rediff.com, 2 March 2012, https://www.rediff.com/movies/report/review-paan-singh-tomar-is-compelling/20120302.html

[78]'7 Khoon Maaf Blog: Irrfan Khan As Wasiullah Khan', bollywoodhungama. com, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9e1tDtD-BY

[79]'Irrfan Khan: Defying Definition', *Forbes India*, 24 December 2013, http://www.forbesindia.com/article/2013-celebrity-100/irrfan-khan-defying-definition/36739/1

[80]'Gulzar on 7 Khoon Maaf', *The Telegraph*, 17 February 2011,

https://www.telegraphindia.com/entertainment/gulzar-on-7-khoon-maaf/cid/425930

[81]Ankur Pathak, 'The Resurrection of Irrfan Khan', *HuffPost India*, 1 May 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/the-resurrection-of-irrfan-khan_in_5cc94721e4b0913d078a8f53

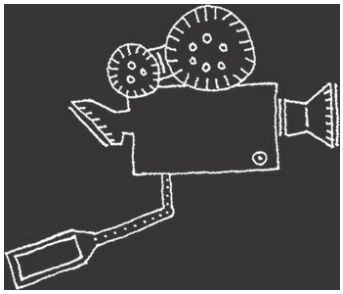
[82]Ankur Pathak, 'The Resurrection of Irrfan Khan', *HuffPost India*, 1 May 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/the-resurrection-of-irrfan-khan_in_5cc94721e4b0913d078a8f53

[83]'Keep Me Out of Haider's Promotions, Irrfan Tells Vishal Bhardwaj', *India Today*, 5 August 2014, https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/bollywood/story/keep-me-out-of-haider-promotions-irrfan-tells-vishal-bhardwaj-202930-2014-08-05

[84]'Irrfan Khan and Anup Singh Discuss Why They Work Well Together', *Variety*, https://variety.com/video/irrfan-khan-anup-singh-working-relationship/

7

AN ACTOR REINVENTS HIMSELF



The day I become conventional, something inside me will die.[85]

By 2015, Irrfan Khan's acting had created a wave in the Indian film industry. He had not only established himself as a major actor in the Hindi film industry and even in Hollywood, but had also already taken enough risks. Now he was ready to head into a territory that was still unchartered for him—to act as a romantic lead. He had revealed the romantic streak in him in films ranging from *The Namesake* (2006) to *Life in a… Metro* (2007) and there were even some lovely moments with Mahie Gill in *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012). Now he was ready to take on full-fledged romantic comedy roles. But Irrfan was not setting out to become the next Shah Rukh Khan. He would play it on his own terms, the everyman, with touches of Amol Palekar and Farooq Shaikh, but mostly it would be a new kind of a romantic man, as defined by Irrfan Khan himself.

Piku and the Beautiful Magic

First up, Irrfan was cast as Rana, owner of a South Delhi-based cab company in Shoojit Sircar's delightfully charming and a very original comedy-drama, *Piku* (2015). Irrfan would act for the first time with Deepika Padukone (playing the title role), clearly the number one Hindi film actress of the time, along with Amitabh Bachchan (playing Piku's father, Bhaskor Banerjee, an eccentric old man, obsessed with his bowel movement).

It was for this role that Irrfan gave up the opportunity to act in Ridley Scott's *The Martian* (2015). And it did not bother Irrfan that he got the third billing in the film. He was more interested in acting opposite Deepika and Amitabh Bachchan.

As was the case with many other filmmakers who cast Irrfan in their films, Shoojit and his writer Juhi Chaturvedi also wrote the script with the actor in mind. Shoojit approached Irrfan while the script was still work-in-progress. ‘He was quite excited and so he knew he was going to play this role,’ Shoojit says.

Shoojit also felt that Irrfan was perhaps the only actor of his generation who could perform the role, especially since the script did not say much about the character of Rana. The challenge for Irrfan was to bring out the nuances and subtle touches of Rana. ‘I had seen these kinds of characters in Delhi,’ the director says. ‘But on paper he was just hanging out there, nothing else. We needed an intelligent actor to bring out Rana’s identity.’

Rana’s personality traits, the stresses that he goes through on a daily basis —at work, at home, where his mother and sister drive him crazy—make him no different than other regular people. Everyday life can put down a person, sometimes make him do things that the person does not want to do. And that is what makes Rana one of the most endearing Hindi film characters in recent times. Shoojit and Juhi Chaturvedi deserve the credit for creating such a real and believable character. But the director is generous, as he says this, ‘Irrfan brought out the magic that we were looking for. Rana is one of his finest roles.’

Like other directors who had worked with Irrfan, Shoojit also appreciated the actor’s rare quality—that he wanted as much information about his character, back story and motivations, virtually the DNA of his character. ‘Sometimes I would get exhausted talking,’ Shoojit says about how he would direct Irrfan. ‘I would not have any more words to express myself. He is a rare artist. He takes everything inside him, absorbs it and he comes up with a unique way to express himself.’

Having three strong actors coming from very different schools of acting can create some commotion on the set. But at times this can also be a blessing. Exactly in the middle of the film, just before the intermission, Rana, Bhaskor and Piku find themselves arguing on a highway between Delhi and Kolkata, and they are basically stuck. Bhaskor has found a knife in the trunk of the car and he wants Rana to throw it away before they continue driving. Rana is adamant that he will not throw the knife away. Piku is simply frustrated with the two men.

The scene was written in the script, but it did not seem to be working out the way Shoojit would have liked, and so he asked the actors to improvise.

The three had already shot the film for a few weeks, and they were quite comfortable with their characters. What followed was a chaotic situation, but there was a method in the madness.

'All three of them were on their own,' Shoojit says. 'But they were so much in character that everything fell into place. They were in three different corners, sitting apart, and yet it looked so real. One guy (Bhaskor) didn't want to move; the other guy (Rana) was fed up and this girl was completely fed up of both of them, but she had to take a stand.'

It is one of the best scenes—Irrfan, Amitabh and Deepika shining on their own, and yet, as an ensemble cast, they bring out the best in each other. Shoojit's gamble paid off. Sharply edited and shot, with three wonderful performers, the knife scene set *Piku* apart from most other films released the same year.

Irrfan's Rana is often exasperated and he shows it on his face as he is stuck on the long car journey to Kolkata with the father and daughter bickering all the time. He has agreed to drive them to Kolkata since none of the drivers in his company want to take on the challenge of spending time with Piku and her father, given Piku's outbursts and mood swings. But this is the first time Rana is watching the father and daughter that closely. He often has a smile of resignation, as if he is saying, 'I cannot believe I am caught between these two,' or 'Where the hell is this conversation going?' He often looks at Deepika in disbelief and one time she even asks him, 'Why are you looking at me?'

'Often I told him to do things, but he's a brilliant actor and a lot of it was his own doing,' Shoojit says as he laughs. 'That irritation on his face shows as the father and daughter start to argue about Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu and what not. That was Irrfan acting.'

One of my favourite scenes in the film is when Rana is in Kolkata in the Banerjee family's main courtyard and everyone is arguing since the water supply has been cut off. There is no water for the toilets or to cook. The family asks Rana to fix the water pump, but he wants to leave for Delhi immediately. Finally, he cannot take all the noise and yells out, '*Arre chup* (Please shut up)!' which startles the family. And then asks where the water pump is. He shakes up the lot, but it is fun to watch Irrfan a few seconds before he yells. He may be mentally preparing to scream at them, but nothing in his body movement suggests that the outburst is imminent. Irrfan is so good in the moment. Even though he, the actor, knows what is going to

happen next in the script, the outburst from Rana, the character, seems totally spontaneous and most unexpected.

Then, towards the end of the film, there is a lovely scene where Piku and Rana are at the Ganga ghat in Kolkata and she says to him that after a certain age parents have to be kept alive and it becomes the responsibility of the children. She adds that given this responsibility, she would find it hard to find a life partner. But then she turns to Rana and asks if he would marry her, and he responds with a sly smile, '*Matha kharab nahi hai mera* (I haven't lost my mind).'

Piku is a romantic film. There is clearly an attraction between Rana and Piku, but their romance—if that is what one can call it—is unlike anything that has ever been shown in a mainstream Hindi-language film. There is chemistry, liking, and this much is clear—after having argued for a large part of the film, Piku and Rana start to care for each other. The film ends with the two playing badminton on the street outside Piku's Chittaranjan Park house in Delhi.

'We had told Irrfan and Deepika that we don't know if the romance happens or not, but there are many relationships and friendships that are not fully explained,' Shoojit says. 'You don't know if they will be together or not—whether they will love each other. But they have become companions—*shoulder dene wale companions* (companions who can offer their shoulder to each other).'

'I left it at them playing badminton,' he adds. 'She doesn't have to show love and go beyond just the friendship. And this can be beautiful also.'

Piku was loved by critics in India and abroad. *The New York Times* review referred to Irrfan as 'brooding and wonderful' in the film.[86] *The Guardian* critic also praised Irrfan, saying, 'It's the terrific Khan (*Life of Pi*) who steals it, working subtle comic wonders with wry looks.'[87] And Rediff.com referred to Irrfan Khan as 'characteristically flawless'. The reviewer added, 'Despite a less author-backed role than father and daughter, he (Irrfan) imbues his character with enough authenticity to steal many a scene and give the narrative its consistency.'[88]

AIB and Irrfan 2.0

In 2015, Irrfan Khan began to experiment with different genres of filmmaking and he even stepped in the area of comedy where he himself was the joke. Irrfan was approached by the extremely popular comedy troupe, All India Bakchod (AIB), to appear in a song video that would be a spoof of the Bollywood clubbing party scenes.

The video and the song would be titled *Every Bollywood Party Song*.[89] The nearly-seven-minute video starts with an office meeting where Irrfan and his manager (played by an AIB regular comedian, Naveen Polishetty) attempt to impress the AIB team (Tanmay Bhat, Gursimran Khamba, Rohan Joshi and Ashish Shakya) about how cool the actor is and his reach that goes from Christopher Nolan to the Oscars. The four AIB guys pretend to be in awe of Irrfan, but when they ask what kind of a video he wants to do, the actor responds, '*Kya kar sakte hain*? *Kuch bhi kar sakte hain* (What can I do? I can do anything).' And then he repeats his response in English. 'I don't want to brag about myself. But I can do anything (emphasizing each word in the second sentence).'

This is followed by the video where Irrfan is shown hanging around at a bar, with a number of hot girls around him. Bartenders mix drinks and people dance as colourful discotheque lights splash all over them. Irrfan lip syncs the song, one of the few times he did that in his career in the Hindi film industry. The song has all the clichéd qualities of many such songs that are regularly featured in Bollywood films. Essentially the video is one long joke.

The joke took off in a big way and Irrfan largely succeeded in his attempt to change his image from a serious actor who carefully selected projects that would enhance his acting talents to just a cool guy. The video was posted in August 2015. It has over 12 million hits on YouTube.

The AIB first pitched the song to actor Sidharth Malhotra. But there was no response from the star and then just around that time Tanmay Bhat, co-founder of AIB, met filmmaker Vasan Bala (*Peddlers*, 2012 and *Mard Ko Dard Nahi Hota*, 2018). And that is when Irrfan's name came up. Vasan knew Irrfan's manager and had worked on the Hindi dialogues of *The Lunchbox*, during which time he had gotten to know the actor as well.

'We were initially uncertain about Irrfan, but then we started reading the script again with him in mind,' Tanmay Bhat says. 'Imagining these lines coming out of Irrfan's mouth made us crack up. That was a very funny

visual. We thought for the joke's sake Irrfan would be perfect for this. We had never seen Irrfan in this avatar. The joke heavily relied on Irrfan being out of his comfort zone entirely.'

When Irrfan was approached, he jumped at the idea of trying out something new. 'I knew he had different points of view and he really wanted to reach out and say different things,' Vasan Bala says. And he adds that around the time Irrfan accepted the role in *Piku*, his approach towards his work had begun to change. 'He decided to stop playing safe,' Vasan says.

'The big selling point for us was when we met him—the enthusiasm with which he heard the script, he clapped at a few places,' Tanmay says. 'I say this lovingly, but Irrfan is very bakchod (someone who indulges in senseless talk). You can sit with him for hours and just talk, talk, and make jokes. He makes everyone in the room very comfortable.'

Irrfan was also very appreciative of the sort of comedy the AIB team was developing. 'When he met us, he spoke about the roast (where AIB members roasted two Hindi film stars, Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor, and each other as well) and he called us krantikaris (revolutionaries),' Tanmay says. And so he gave the team three days of his time in the midst of the promotional work he was doing for *Piku*. He also showed up for two days of dance rehearsals. In fact, he gave the AIB group more time than an actor of his stature would have done. 'He did it with the joy of a creator and not the joy of an actor,' Tanmay adds.

Dancing and lip syncing are actually not as simple as seasoned Hindi film actors would make one believe. Some actors are born with the talent to catch a beat, but most work very hard to get it. 'Irrfan is known to throw people off with his rhythm and acting,' Vasan says. 'But here was the challenge for someone who is so used to throwing the rhythm off. In learning the dance steps he had to follow a specific rhythm and yet perform in his inimitable style.'

More than anything else, Irrfan enjoyed hanging around with the young comedians and writers, listening to them and engaging in conversations. 'He didn't bother about the outcome of the video,' Vasan says. 'But the process was what excited him. I think that was his motive.'

At the beginning of his film career and even a few years before he shot the AIB video, Irrfan was very careful about how his career was evolving. Perhaps it had to do with the chance he took in accepting the role in *Piku*, but by the time the AIB team approached him, Irrfan had developed a Zen-like

quality. ‘There was this happiness around him,’ Vasan recalls. ‘That was very evident. He wasn’t bothered about his image. He was almost like a kid, saying, “Okay, throw things at me.” And, in fact, the only time he would be impatient was when people were not throwing things at him.’ (The relationship that Irrfan developed with the AIB team resulted in a bigger project—a web series—a political satire for Amazon Prime. The show was called *Gormint* and was supposed to premiere in January 2019. Unfortunately, Irrfan had to opt out of the show since he was getting cancer treatment in London through most of 2018. In November 2018 Amazon removed the show runner Gursimran Khamba from the project since he had been accused of sexual misconduct during the #MeToo campaign. The show is still to be aired.)

The connection that developed between Irrfan and Tanmay led to a valuable friendship. ‘In fact, to date, if there is a meme or a very funny joke, something I know he will like, I still share it with him. I still ping him once every couple of months and say, “*Hi Sir, bahut yaad aa rahi hai.* (I miss you a lot). How are you doing?”’ The last time they met, AIB was doing a show in London and Irrfan was getting his treatment. Irrfan attended their show and then the group went out for dinner.

A couple of years after Irrfan appeared in the AIB video, the childlike quality he had started to display would be seen in two romantic comedies —*Hindi Medium* and *Qarib Qarib Singlle* (both films released in 2017).

Cut to Comedy

Irrfan’s take on Rana in *Piku* earned him many admirers, including director/writer Saket Chaudhary and co-writer Zeenat Lakhani who were finalizing the script of *Hindi Medium* (2017) at the time *Piku* released. And while they may have had other actors in their mind in addition to Irrfan, once *Piku* opened, their approach to *Hindi Medium* changed. The husband-wife team narrated the script to Irrfan, and based on his interest in the project, they did not reach out to any other actor.

What impressed Saket about Irrfan from the beginning of the shoot was

that he would never try to impress the filmmaking team, never give the impression that he was working hard. ‘His job responsibility was to give the performance but not reveal the tools,’ he says. ‘A lot of times actors want to impress you with the preparation they are doing rather than the performance.’

But it took Irrfan a few days through the shoot to get into the character of Raj Batra, a loud Punjabi man, owner of a sari shop, Batra Fashion Studio, and living in Old Delhi, who desperately wants to get his daughter admitted into an English-medium school. Much of it has to do with the pressure from his wife Mita (Pakistani actress Saba Qamar) who wants to ‘move up’ in Delhi’s high society. But first Irrfan had to become Raj and get into the film’s comic groove.

‘In the first few days of the shoot, he was really pensive,’ Zeenat Lakhani says. ‘When we would talk about any scene, he would say, “*Mujhe sur nahi mil raha hai* (I am not getting the rhythm of the character).”’ Zeenat realized that he was trying to figure out how to pitch his character, since Raj could have easily become over-the-top, and that was not Irrfan’s method of acting. So Zeenat got into the habit of asking Irrfan, ‘*Kya sur mil gaya* (Did you find the rhythm of your character)?’

‘He’s such an understated, subtle actor,’ Zeenat adds. ‘He was trying to find where the humour would work, and at the same time he would be believable.’

The actor finally got into the groove of the film, but there were at least two times director Saket had to convince Irrfan to do something outside his comfort zone. Both scenes appear towards the beginning of the film. In the first scene Irrfan wears a red ghagra with a dupatta on his head to make a sale to a young bride-to-be (played with her usual comic style by Mallika Dua) at his store. It is a hilarious moment where Irrfan’s Raj, much like many men who sell saris and other outfits, puts on the garments to impress their female customers. With a sly smile on his face, Irrfan covers his face with the red dupatta to give the look of a coy bride.

But getting Irrfan to perform the scene was a challenge. ‘It was very difficult to convince him,’ Saket says. ‘And he kept asking, “Why do you need this?”’ Irrfan believed that he was being asked to dress in drag and to find humour in that situation. ‘For us it was about being a good salesman,’ Saket adds. ‘And you go to any extent to make a sale.’ He adds that finally Zeenat had to convince him. ‘He was doubtful, but when he started doing it he really started enjoying it.’

In another scene, Raj and Mita have now moved into a larger house in a posh part of Delhi and they throw a party for their young daughter's friends and their parents. Already Raj has made a fool of himself when he asked a waiter to serve pizzas and burgers instead of caviar. Suddenly the DJ starts to play Sukhbir's song 'Oh ho ho ho' and Raj breaks into a typical Punjabi wedding-style dance with his daughter, while Mita and the other guests stand around, looking quite uncomfortable.

The scene required Irrfan to dance, and once again the NSD-trained actor was unsure of what he was being asked to do. 'He didn't want to do it,' Saket says. 'In Delhi, that song plays at all parties. Any self-respecting Punjabi will play that song. So we had to really convince him that his character is Punjabi and he will end up dancing.' Of course, once Irrfan danced, he did such a good job that it looked like he had always been dancing—on and off screen.

Hindi Medium has a rich ensemble cast and some of Irrfan's best scenes are with the film's supporting actors. In one scene a very angry Raj barges into the office of a consultant (Tillotama Shome) who was supposed to get his daughter admitted to a good school. Irrfan and Tillotama had previously acted in *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost (2013)*, and it is clear that the actors are comfortable with each other, especially as the scene consists of a fair amount of confrontation. They talk in the lobby of the office building, and the conversation goes like this:

Consultant: *Aap araam sey baat nahi kar sakte* (Can't you talk softly)?

Raj: *Aji, araam se kaise baat kar lenge? Hamari raaton ki neend haram hui padee hai* (How do you expect us to talk softly? We've been having sleepless nights).

Raj is irritated because the son of his employee at the sari shop has managed to get into a good school. A few seconds later Tillotama says in a sarcastic tone, 'Please keep your volume down.' When she explains that the employee's kid must have been admitted to the school because of a reservation system for the underprivileged, a baffled Raj shouts out, '*Hamara koi haq nahi hai* (Don't we have any right)?' 'Keep it down…down, Mr Batra,' Tillotama says as she starts to almost whisper, yet maintaining sarcasm in her tone.

The scene was largely improvised, Tillotama Shome says. 'Saket let me improvise, and Irrfan responded to each improv with such delight and a willingness to play,' she adds. One can tell the two actors are really enjoying performing in the scene together. And it is Irrfan's graciousness that he does

not attempt to steal the scene from Tillotama, rather, lets her shine.

Later, when the Batras move to a low-income housing colony to maintain the pretense that they are poor, Irrfan's Raj plays along in a hilarious scene with his neighbour Shyam Prakash (Deepak Dobriyal). Shyam kills a mosquito on the wall of his room, which he claims was carrying the dengue virus, and then starts to make a low buzzing sound. That is how female mosquitoes attract their male counterparts, he says, while Raj and his wife cower down in the corner of the charpai. Irrfan is especially funny as he first jumps when Deepak shows him a dead mosquito, and then when he yells out, '*Arre par idhar kyon bula rahe ho, bhai* (Why are you calling the mosquito here)?'

The scene does not have much significance in the plot but all the actors including Saba Qamar and the two little kids play along in what becomes a real comic moment. 'We hadn't written most of the scene, except for a mention of dengue,' Saket says, adding that all the actors improvised their dialogues and performances. 'It wasn't a big moment. But Deepak completely built it and made it into a full joke.'

Hindi Medium was a huge success, earning over 340 crores. It became Irrfan's biggest hit of all time, and placed him in the exclusive box office club until now reserved for the three Khans and a few other actors. The young man from Jaipur who had come to Delhi's NSD with the dream of becoming a movie star had finally reached his goal at the age of 50.

However, the biggest surprise was how the film performed rather well in countries like China and Japan. 'We didn't anticipate it,' Saket says. 'We knew we had a good story. But we didn't anticipate that it would resonate so far and wide.'

A New Path: Irrfan as Producer

It was around this period that Irrfan Khan had begun to produce films. Actually he gave his support to two projects, which were essentially produced by his wife Sutapa Sikdar and her friend from her *Star Bestsellers* days—Shailja Kejriwal. The comedy, *Qarib Qarib Singlle*, directed by

Tanuja Chandra (*Dushman*, 1998 and *Sangharsh*, 1999), was one of the two projects. *Qarib Qarib Singlle* is based on a story by Kamna Chandra, Tanuja's mother, and the director co-wrote the script with one of the hottest talents in the Hindi film industry—Ghazal Dhaliwal (*Lipstick Under My Burka*, 2016).

Once again, Irrfan was the focus of the script that Tanuja and Ghazal wrote. 'He was possibly an odd, but also a perfect choice for it,' Tanuja says. The script arrived at Irrfan and Sutapa's home, but the actor was rather busy and he did not have much time to read all the material being sent to him. So Sutapa read the script and sent it to Shailja, suggesting that she was inclined to follow through the project. When Shailja read the script, she found it 'breezy fun'. But while Irrfan was looking for new material that would not only challenge him, and give him the opportunity to redefine his image as a serious actor, when Shailja and Sutapa pitched the script of *Qarib Qarib Singlle* to him, he was initially reluctant. 'It is a little outlandish for him,' Shailja says. Eventually, he agreed to play the eccentric romantic lead, Yogi, a wannabe poet. And he green-lit the project as Sutapa and Shailja decided to produce it.

This was the first rom-com Tanuja would direct, and naturally, she saw the romantic actor within Irrfan. 'Irrfan is an excellent performer, we all know this,' Tanuja says. 'However, I also felt he's funny as hell and for sure has the ability to be the romantic hero; in fact, a more layered one than most romantic leads, because he'd be utterly believable and real. Besides, couplets written by a wannabe shaayar would so convincingly roll off Irrfan's tongue!'

Qarib Qarib Singlle is the story of a man, Yogendra 'Yogi' Kumar Devendra Nath Prajapati (Irrfan Khan), and Jaya Shashidharan (Parvathy), a young widow. The two meet via an online dating site. There is no initial attraction. In fact, Jaya is quite turned off by Yogi's crass way of talking. But eventually, due to circumstances, the two set off on a journey together, to meet Yogi's three ex-girlfriends, where much of their emotional bonding will be tested. The journey makes them start to care for each other.

A lot of thought went into selecting the actress to play Jaya. Eventually the team settled for the Malayalam actress, Parvathy, who was 29 at the time of the release of *Qarib Qarib Singlle.* Parvathy is a successful star in the Malayalam film industry, but this was her first Hindi film role. 'We were trying to break all stereotypes,' Shailja says. 'We didn't want a matrimonial column type of an actress. She doesn't have to be khoobsoorat, gori

(beautiful, fair-skinned), tall. We just wanted a real woman, who everyone would relate to, who didn't mind her hair being messy, who didn't ask for designer clothes.'

And the fact that there was quite an age gap between Irrfan and Parvathy was not an issue. 'We don't really go into who is how old, because we can't really hide his age,' Shailja adds. 'In modern urban relationships you don't care about the age issues. And they meet through a dating site. So it was okay.'

Through the shoot, Irrfan and Tanuja had one key disagreement, about how Yogi should be played. Irrfan, as a habit, and given his initial training in theatre, wanted to underplay Yogi. He usually does not like his characters to be overly dramatic or expressive, according to Tanuja. But she felt that Yogi, despite his easy-going, carefree persona, was troubled from inside.

'People who have lived a deeply felt life have a kind of anxiety about them,' Tanuja says. 'So Yogi needn't have spoken with the kind of leisurely pace Irrfan loves speaking in. It would have been fun to have Yogi be more nervous at times, be a bit more hyper in his manner.' She hoped to see a slightly different Irrfan from his other films. But the actor was very particular about bringing realism in his character. The disagreement between the director and the actor never got fully resolved. 'At times he would agree, and very often, not,' Tanuja adds.

Qarib Qarib Singlle has funny moments, but not the laugh-out-loud brand of comedy. In that sense, the film's tone is similar to *Piku* and less like *Hindi Medium*, which had some outrageously hilarious moments. But here Irrfan also displayed a side of himself that we had rarely seen in any of his films—that of a man with a broken heart.

Towards the end of the film, Yogi and Jaya are in Sikkim, and she goes to meet one of her admirers—a friend from several years ago. Irrfan starts to spy on her, his sad face showing signs of helplessness and a tinge of jealousy as Atif Aslam sings in his melodious voice, 'Woh jo tha khwaab saa, kya kahein jaane dein' (What to say about that dream I had, except let it go)…' It is really sad to see the usually exuberant Yogi—to the extent that he can be annoying—suddenly looking like a man in love feeling deep pain. Irrfan shows signs of jealousy in *Maqbool* when he realizes that Nimmi (Tabu) is sleeping with Abbaji (Pankaj Kapur). He looks terribly disappointed in *The Namesake* when his son Gogol (Kal Penn) shows no reaction to being gifted a copy of Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat*. But in *Qarib Qarib Singlle* it is

painfully sad to see Yogi feeling rejected. Of course, we are watching an overall happy Hindi film, so the final outcome will be different.

Tanuja had decided to shoot the film's final sequences in Sikkim, partly to relive her childhood memories of visiting the state and its mountains. Irrfan tried to dissuade her. He wanted to avoid the long journey to Gangtok, first by air, then a long drive up the mountains. 'However, the moment he saw the magnificent Teesta river, he felt transported,' Tanuja says. 'He said it was one of the most beautiful and riveting rivers he had seen in his life, and his mood changed immediately. After that, he loved Gangtok and its people.'

Irrfan was amazed at how peaceful the fans were in the city, unlike the usual unruly crowds he had encountered in other parts of India. 'They stood almost silently, not pushing ahead, standing in a disciplined manner, simply smiling at him,' Tanuja adds. For his first visit, Sikkim turned out to be a wonderful experience for Irrfan.

The other project Irrfan backed, with Sutapa and Shailja Kejriwal as producers, was the crime thriller *Madaari* (2016) directed by Nishikant Kamat (*Mumbai Meri Jaan*, 2008 and *Drishyam*, 2015). In *Madaari*, Irrfan plays a regular man, Nirmal Kumar, who kidnaps a politician's son to bring attention to the government's corruption that has resulted in his family's death.

Running on a similar track as director Neeraj Pandey's *A Wednesday* (2008), *Madaari* was based on a story written by Shailja Kejriwal. And the story was somewhat inspired by the anti-corruption people's movement led by Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal. Shailja shared the story with Irrfan and he agreed to act in it and also lend his name to the film to help bring in the finances. For years, the actor had been nudging Shailja to get some new and different material for him, so it was natural for her to approach him. 'We had never produced a full-length feature,' she says. 'It was really sweet of Irrfan to be fully behind us.'

Irrfan's performance in *Madaari* was strong—a troubled man who has committed a criminal act and the gentleness he shows towards the child he has kidnapped. The film ends in a sweet but predictable tone, with the child

running to give a hug to his kidnapper, much to the dismay of his politician father. But as a film, *Madaari* was muddled, and not a high point in the actor's career. It also failed at the box office.

A Front Page Murder

There is one more important film of Irrfan Khan's long and remarkable career so far, which was released around the time of the films discussed in this chapter. Director Meghna Gulzar, working with a tight and gripping script written by Vishal Bhardwaj, reexamined the Noida double murder case of 13-year-old girl Aarushi Talwar and 45-year-old Hemraj Banjade, a male live-in domestic help employed by her family. The film *Talvar* (2015), produced by Vishal and Junglee Pictures, would be Irrfan's last great performance before his illness, released three years before he fell sick.

The film also starred Konkona Sen Sharma and Neeraj Kabi, playing Nutun and Ramesh Tandon, the dead teenager's parents. The family name was changed from Talwar to Tandon as were the first names of the characters. But the film mostly follows the case that shocked India, or as one character says in the beginning of the film, '*Poori middle class society jadd se hil gayee hai*. *Ek baap apni beti ka murder kaise kar sakta hai* (The entire middle class society is shaken by its roots. How can a father murder his own daughter)?' And in showing different perspectives and points of view related to the murders, Vishal Bhardwaj's script and Meghna Gulzar's film achieve a rare element of success. The filmmakers do not take sides and do not give any final answer to the question, 'Who killed Aarushi and Hemraj?' But *Talvar* leaves the audience disturbed, uncertain and rattled. And that is why it is such a good film—smart, sharp, intelligent and a lot stronger than regular mainstream Hindi-language thrillers.

It would also be one of the most complex roles Irrfan would play, Ashwin Kumar, an investigating officer examining the double murder case, annoyed at the erratic behaviour and demands of his senior officers, at the bungling junior policemen who messed up evidence related to the case, and troubled in his personal life as his own marriage (the gorgeous Tabu playing his wife, in

a guest appearance) is ending. Like his character in *Slumdog Millionaire*, he beats up and tortures suspects in police custody, but here he is also tormented and conflicted. Only Vishal Bhardwaj who knew Irrfan well could have created such a sharply written, nuanced character, and watching the film, it is clear that the actor loved the challenge of playing the role.

Meghna's first connection with Irrfan happened when he acted in one of the episodes of the TV show *Kirdaar*, directed by her father Gulzar. And then she even remembers seeing Irrfan during the shoot of Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*. Through *Talvar*'s writing process, Vishal and Meghna were convinced that Irrfan was the only actor in the Hindi film industry who could play Ashwin Kumar. Irrfan was always on their mind as they researched the character, gave him small mannerisms, nuances and his personal trajectory. 'Every time we came around the character of Ashwin Kumar, it was just him,' Meghna says. 'We knew we were referencing Irrfan Sir.'

After Vishal sent the script of *Talvar* to Irrfan, Meghna went to visit him. And from that point on, the actor started questioning the director on her perspectives and opinions about the double murder, the possible killer(s) and the motivation for the crime. As Meghna says, Irrfan's Ashwin Kumar had a clear focus about the crime. 'There was no doubt in the audience's mind what this investigator actually believed,' she says. 'But off camera Irrfan was constantly questioning his character's motivations. He needed to be convinced that the line he was walking as a character in the film had its merits,' Meghna says. 'Because it is a tricky subject. But I would also like to believe that he was testing my knowledge.'

Meghna believes that once Irrfan had fully processed Ashwin Kumar, he refined the character, making him his own, adding dimensions and nuances that were beyond how Vishal and Meghna had seen Ashwin Kumar. From the beginning of the film when we are introduced to Ashwin, we see a distracted man, playing video games on his older model Nokia phone. But Irrfan took his disinterest in life to the next level. When, for instance, he investigates the dead girl's father, a visibly shaken up Ramesh Tandon (Neeraj Kabi), he lets his junior, Vedant Chaudhury (Sohum Shah), do the initial round of questioning. And in the presence of the witness, Ashwin continues to play his video game—something that must rattle Ramesh. He does not look into Ramesh's eyes unless it is absolutely necessary.

'He develops this disdain, a disregard, that "I am also a cold-blooded investigator who is just asking you these questions,"' Meghna says.

The violence that Irrfan's Ashwin Kumar displays, the anger with which he beats up people, is truly frightening. There are a number of people Ashwin beats up through the film—a couple of police officers, including Inspector Dhaniram, played by the terrific actor Gajraj Rao. When Ashwin is suspended from his job, he attacks his junior Vedant Chaudhury who has been spying on him and reporting to a senior officer. And then there are two witnesses he investigates, first charming them, then yelling at them and then ending up slapping them as well. In fact, during the shooting of one investigation scene, Irrfan became so engaged in the moment that he realized he had hit the other actor really hard.

'Irrfan kept apologizing and asking, "*Zor se to nahi lagee naa* (I hope I did not hit you hard)?"', Meghna recalls, 'while the other actor kept saying, "*Sir aap chinta mat kariye. Aap aur maariye* (Sir, do not worry. You can hit me more)."'

At times Ashwin Kumar does not need to beat up or yell at someone to scare that person. He simply has to speak to them in a biting sarcastic tone. When he realizes that the handprints of the killer were never secured by the low-level Noida police officers, nor did they call the forensic experts, he talks to them as if they are five-year-old kids: '*Koi baat nahi. Agli baar aisa koi murder hota hai naa, koi haath chodta hai khoon ka bhara hua, to dhyan rakhna. Hmm?* Very good (Never mind. But if next time a murder like this happens and someone leaves a mark of a bloodstained hand, then just be careful. Okay?).' Vedant, who is standing next to him, is trying hard not to laugh.

The film also gives Irrfan a brief delicate scene to perform when he arrives late at night, drunk and broken, at his ex-wife Reema Kumar's home, and says he cannot go back to his workplace. Tabu stands beside him and gently massages his hair.

Irrfan received a lot of praise for his performance in *Talvar*. Rachel Saltz of *The New York Times* wrote, 'Mr Khan is this movie's best weapon. Playing a familiar character type, the world-weary detective, he gives a performance, full of small, sly details, that doesn't seem familiar at all.'[90]

Rajeev Masand writing in News18.com said this about Irrfan:

> It's Irrfan Khan, of course, who is the glue that holds this film together. The actor builds his character brick by brick, delivering an intricate, nuanced performance that's hard to fault. From watching

> sardonically as the junior cops play the blame game, to barely looking up from his phone, occupied in a game as Ramesh Tandon weeps inconsolably during his testimony, this is acting of the highest order.[91]

‘Chhota Sa Fasana’[92]

Irrfan’s last three films were released in 2018. *Puzzle,* the American indie, was discussed earlier. The other two slight comedies fell into the category of the new genre of films he had started working on. But the two films, *Blackmail* and *Karwaan,* were only mildly successful.

In *Blackmail*, directed by Abhinay Deo (*Delhi Belly*, 2011), Irrfan’s character Dev Kaushal finds his wife Reena (Kriti Kulhari) in bed with her boyfriend, Ranjit Arora (Arunoday Singh). Dev comes up with a peculiar idea of revenge. He starts to blackmail Ranjit, with the threat of exposing him to his wife Dolly (a hilarious Divya Dutta). The plot gets stretched and convoluted, the jokes get thin, and the film’s energy starts to taper down. Irrfan’s role did not challenge him enough. In fact, at times it felt as if he was simply doing the role because he had to. Released in April 2018, *Blackmail* was eventually a disappointment.

Karwaan, directed by Akarsh Khurana and written by Bijoy Nambiar, is a road movie. Although it lacks the charm of *Piku*, the other road movie Irrfan has acted in, and has touches of *Little Miss Sunshine* (the hilarious 2006 American indie film), *Karwaan* is beautiful to look at. It is set mostly in Kerala, in the state’s misty mountains, and is shot by the very talented cinematographer, Avinash Arun. The film gives Irrfan a chance to act with two young actors—Dulquer Salmaan, the charming star of Malayalam cinema making his debut in a Hindi film, and the actress Mithila Palkar.

The film takes its characters on a road trip from Bangalore to Kochi. Dulquer’s Avinash Rajpurohit has to take a journey to collect his father’s body, which has been mistakenly sent to another family. Avinash travels by a van driven by his friend Shaukat (Irrfan). Along the way they pick up Tanya (Mithila) whose grandmother has also passed away. And Tanya’s

grandmother's body has been mistakenly exchanged with that of Avinash's father.

Irrfan's Shaukat delivers some crazy dialogues, including one where he says, 'One should never trust a crying woman and a milkman.' He has insane rules, an example being, a woman who does not cover her legs cannot travel in his van. But Shaukat starts to get irritating. In fact, his character becomes a tad bit racist as he gives ridiculous lectures in Hindi to clueless white tourists he encounters on the way. Some people in the audience would have found humour in what Shaukat says, but quite frankly, his statements are not funny. The dialogues given to Shaukat tend to make him not-so-likeable.

Blackmail, *Karwaan* and *Puzzle* were released after Irrfan announced that he was suffering from neuroendocrine tumour. Film promotions and all other projects had to be put on hold as the actor spent nearly 10 months getting treatment in London. Until this point, Irrfan had planned his life, whatever was within his control—from joining NSD to moving to Bombay, acting in television shows, even when he was unhappy. He acted in some films because he had to work to make a living, but along the way the film industries in India and Hollywood began to recognize his talent. At one point he was so much in demand that he sometimes had to make the tough decision of giving up major, well-paying projects for something smaller, but equally important. Then, practically for the first time in his life, a situation cropped up where he could not control his destiny, other than to move to London for medical treatment.

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[89]'AIB: Every Bollywood Party Song Feat, Irrfan', All India Bakchod, 2 August 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3nhttUMhrI&t=55s

[90]Rachel Saltz, '"Talvar", with Irrfan Khan, Depicts a Double Murder's Muddied Waters', *The New York Times*, 4 October 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/05/movies/review-talvar-with-irrfan-khan-depicts-a-double-murders-muddied-waters.html

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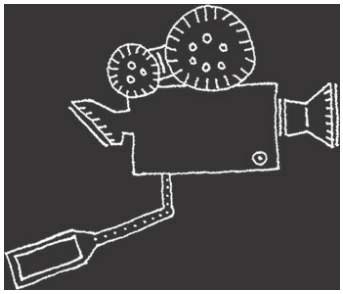
[92]A song from the movie *Karwaan*, literally translating to 'a little anecdote'.

A SEA OF STORIES TO TELL

AN EPILOGUE



As if I was tasting life for the first time, the magical side of it.[93]

Movie stars are like friends who live far away, and yet we believe we know them well. We like to stay in touch with them—at least through social media in the case of the movie stars—but if we do not hear from them regularly, we just assume all is well.

Through the years 2016, 2017, until the early part of 2018, I was aware of Irrfan Khan's work. I saw some of his new films—*Madaari, Hindi Medium, No Bed of Roses* and *The Song of Scorpions*. The last two I even considered programming for the International Film Festival and Awards, Macao. But the two films did not make the final cut. Through his work I knew Irrfan was there, working, and I was sure he would sooner or later surprise us with another significant film.

The last time I saw Irrfan Khan was in October 2016 at a Mumbai Film Festival party at the city's Four Seasons hotel. The party was on the rooftop, with loud music, filmmakers, actors and journalists mingling with each other. I was sitting with a journalist friend and I saw Irrfan was engaged in a conversation with a woman. I did not disturb him, but a few minutes later he walked towards me and we shook hands. It felt good to be recognized by my favourite actor in a crowded party. We spoke briefly, although I cannot recall what we talked about. Then we switched back to our respective conversations.

Since I spend my time between New Delhi and New York, I often do not meet people from the Hindi film industry. However, given how prevalent social media is in our lives, much of the contact one makes with celebrities is through Twitter. So, in early January 2018, in the middle of the Academy Awards voting process, I sent out this tweet, partly as a harmless joke: 'I wonder if @BeingSalmanKhan @aamir_khan @deepikapadukone @ SrBachchan @priyankachopra have spent the holiday season watching all the Oscar-worthy screeners they have been sent? @soonitara @irrfank @rasulp —you guys watching movies? @ Academy voting begins Jan 5!'

All of the Hindi film personalities I had tagged are voting members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. I got a couple of responses—one from Sooni Taraporevala and another from Irrfan's manager at that time, Manpreet Bachchar, who wrote that Irrfan had been religiously watching the screeners in spite of hectic shooting schedules.

Exactly two months later, on 5 March 2018, at midnight, a tweet was sent out from Irrfan Khan's Twitter handle. The tweet announced the launch of a new song from Irrfan's soon-to-be-released film, *Blackmail*. The song 'Patola' is sung by Punjabi singer Guru Randhawa. The tweet included the YouTube link to the song and carried a colourful picture of the singer. Guru Randhawa's face was flanked by two other images—that of Irrfan Khan and his co-star Kirti Kulhari, both dressed as bridegroom and bride respectively.

Four and a half hours later, at 4.36 a.m., another tweet was sent out from Irrfan's account. In the second tweet, very different in tone, the actor shared a devastating personal message with his fans. It read: 'Sometimes you wake up with a jolt with life shaking you up. The last 15 days, my life has been a suspense story. Little had I known that my search for rare stories would make me find a rare disease…'

Irrfan added that he was surrounded by family and friends and requested his fans not to speculate and he promised to come back within seven to ten days when he had conclusive results. And then there was silence.

This news came out of nowhere. Irrfan was known to write his own tweets. One could read the personal voice he would have in his tweets. This one read like an official statement, but still it had the Irrfan touch.

A few weeks earlier, Irrfan had re-tweeted the Annie Leibovitz-inspired cover of *Filmfare* featuring that year's magazine award winners—names like Vidya Balan, Konkona Sen Sharma, Rajkummar Rao, Bappi Lahiri, two newcomers to the scene—directors and writers Amit Masurkar and Neeraj Ghaywan—and Irrfan himself. He had won the best actor award for *Hindi Medium*. In the photograph Irrfan is standing on the extreme left corner, dressed in a strangely designed gray jacket with white stripes. He looks serious, so does Rajkummar, who is seated on the floor beside him. It is unclear when the photograph was taken, but the most important thing is Irrfan is looking confident, alert and healthy. So that is all we knew about Irrfan's state before he startled us with the news about the rare disease.

Eleven days later, as promised, Irrfan tweeted again. He started the tweet with a quote from Margaret Mitchell (author of the American epic, *Gone with*

the Wind)—'Life is under no obligation to give us what we expect.'

That was the first time most of his fans heard about a type of cancer called neuroendocrine tumour. He joked about the rumours that he had brain tumour. 'As far as the rumours that were floated, "neuro" is not always about the brain.' And he added that it would help for everyone to Google the disease. That he still retained his sense of humour was clear from the tweet.

He added that he was leaving the country for treatment and he would keep in touch and report back 'with more stories to tell'.

It is hard to say when Irrfan fell ill. Tigmanshu Dhulia told me he had suddenly begun to lose weight and that had caused concern. 'He loves to eat a lot, but he's so careful with his weight and what he actually eats,' Tishu said a few months after Irrfan had made the devastating announcement. 'Especially now that he has become a star, he watches what he eats. He was growing his own organic vegetables. *Pata nahi usko yeh saala cancer kaise ho gaya* (I don't how he got this damn cancer).'

Varun Gautam, Irrfan's friend from his Jaipur days, told me that in the last few years the actor had gotten very busy with his work and it was hard to connect and spend time with him. 'My Irrfan was lost in a jungle for the past couple of years,' he says, with tears welling up in his eyes. '*Mera Irrfan badal gaya tha.* (My Irrfan had changed.) He was not the Irrfan I knew. Irrfan's real happiness is in flying kites and thinking, spending time in his farmhouse (in Nasik), watching a good film, listening to a song.'

'He was not just busy but he was losing himself,' Varun says. 'The work took more of his time, more travelling, less sleep and yet he was making more money. He recently told me that he had forgotten he hadn't come here to earn money.'

Varun learned about Irrfan's illness when one day he received a phone call from Sutapa. This was sometime before Irrfan officially announced his illness. 'She said doctors had found some spots inside him,' he recalls. 'Then she said, "You have always seen good things in his future. I hope nothing fatal will happen."' So I assured her that he would be okay. 'Even if the doctors are concerned, he will still stay alive. He's not going to die. I have been very confident that he will be okay.'

For a couple of months after Irrfan left for his treatment, there was near silence from his end. And then he spoke to a couple of journalists. Much of the interviews were focused on this new phase in his life. He was reflecting on all the good he had experienced in his life and seemed to be accepting

whatever the future had in store for him. With *The Times of India* he also talked about the pain, the treatment and the surprise to realize that his hospital was right next to Lord's, the cricket ground in London owned by the Marylebone Cricket Club.

'I was travelling on a speedy train ride, had dreams, plans, aspirations, goals, was fully engaged in them,' he said in the interview with *The Times of India*. 'And suddenly someone taps on my shoulder and I turn to see. It's the TC: "Your destination is about to come. Please get down."'[94]

And then he added, 'The only thing certain was the uncertainty… This realization made me submit, surrender and trust, irrespective of the outcome, irrespective of where this takes me…'

In perhaps the only interview he gave before the release of *Puzzle* in August 2018, he spoke to *Associated Press* about how he was angry initially, scared and very vulnerable. But now he had put all his faith in nature. '(I)t's not in my hand. That's (sic) nature that will do whatever it has to do… (W)hatever the outcome, it will be for good and it will be for the best.'[95]

Friends of Irrfan I interviewed, people who had met him in London, all seemed to suggest how positive he was about life in general. Shailja Kejriwal told me that in between treatment, Irrfan and Sutapa would sometimes go to cafes in London and even occasionally go watch plays.

'We were completely by ourselves, not surrounded by movies or people from the industry,' Sutapa Sikdar told *HuffPost India*.[96] 'We wouldn't even know which film is releasing on which Friday.' For the couple, this change in pace and place must have brought them closer. 'It was like discovering a new life together,' she added.

During a visit to London in the summer of 2018, Vipin Sharma spent nearly six hours with Irrfan in London, eating, talking and laughing. Irrfan narrated a story about a television show he had acted in where, during the shoot, a real tiger was brought on the set, and how the actors were afraid to stand close to the animal. When Vipin was leaving, Irrfan said, 'Yaar, some days of mine go really bad,' suggesting he could not see Vipin every day. But then he added, 'Call me.'

And then Vipin narrated two dreams he had about Irrfan. The first, Vipin believed, had a Buddhist connection. In the dream Irrfan was eating a soupy dish out of a bowl used by Buddhist monks and he asked Vipin to taste the dish. Vipin borrowed the spoon from Irrfan and tasted the dish and he liked it. 'I felt very happy that he had found something that made him happy,' he

said.

In the second dream Irrfan was standing close to Vipin and he looked physically weak. In fact, Vipin recalled Irrfan had a peculiar smell that people emit when they have fever. Vipin could sense the smell, but also it was getting less and less. And suddenly Vipin hugged Irrfan in the dream. 'I didn't care about his breath and the smell,' he says.

Tigmanshu Dhulia told me that Irrfan had been responding well to the treatment and his weight loss was under control. But perhaps the most encouraging news about Irrfan I heard was from Sudhir Mishra. Late in August 2018, I met Sudhir in Delhi to talk about this book. He said that he had heard that Irrfan had recently been given the narration of *Hindi Medium 2* (now referred to as *Angrezi Medium* and directed by Homi Adajania). That was the first clear indication that Irrfan was getting better and he was planning to be back to work in films. *Angrezi Medium* is set to be released in early 2020.

Irrfan and Sutapa were back in India in early 2019, much to the relief of his fans and just about everyone in the Hindi film industry. When he returned from London, there were speculations that he would still take some time to recuperate. But Irrfan's desire to get back to work and, of course, the film's schedule, took him to Udaipur to shoot *Angrezi Medium*, his first project after nearly a year. His cancer treatment was done and reports indicated he had been given a clean chit by his doctors. But extra care was taken while he was on the set—from breaks he had to take to regain energy, to a quieter residential stay, away from five-star hotels that he found noisy and the special organic foods flown in for him from Mumbai.

After *Angrezi Medium's* London schedule, Irrfan spent some time in the city with his family. Reports indicated that he was on a private holiday. Later in September the paparazzi tracked Irrfan at Mumbai airport. He was being pushed in a wheelchair, while he had covered his face. A spokesperson for Irrfan issued this statement, 'Irrfan had a successful surgery after wrapping up *Angrezi Medium* shoot in London. He was missing home and has come to Mumbai for a few days to recover. We request the media to not speculate, and thanking everyone again for the continued support.'[97]

A Different Kind of Warrior

It will take Irrfan a while to get back to normal life. But Irrfan's magic as a performer on-screen is there for us to see and appreciate. He has already given us such a treasure trove of performances that should be revisited time and again. Even when we know how an older film of his will shape up, it is pure joy to watch and understand how this man acts, how he continues to surprise his directors, co-actors and, of course, the audience.

His friend and director Anup Singh refers to the secrets that Irrfan carries with him that he slowly reveals as he acts before the camera. For instance, in a scene that requires anger and confrontation with another character, most actors would finish off their enemy with a stroke. They would express anger by shouting or come up with a big gesture and finish off their task. But Irrfan is a different kind of warrior, according to Anup, who actually enjoys the kill.

'You might not even feel his first blow,' Anup adds. 'You then realize that you are bleeding, and he will probe into the bleeding, the wound, go deeper and deeper. And then finally he will pull your heart out.'

So Irrfan's greatest quality as an actor is that he never reveals all his cards at once, but he slowly gives you small tastes of what his entire performance will be like. There is no readymade idea about Irrfan's character that is revealed to us. Instead, his gestures, look, postures, every breath he takes construct the character and all of it before our eyes. By the time he speaks his first few words, you begin to sense the rhythm of the performance. That is the beauty of Irrfan, the actor. He brings a certain musicality in his performance.

In his finest performances, aided by good writing, and strong direction, it is never easy to say what kind of a character he is. One can never typecast an actor like Irrfan. In films like *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost, No Bed of Roses, Maqbool* or even *The Lunchbox*, where his Saajan breaks Ila's (Nimrat Kaur) heart by not meeting her at the planned date, Irrfan informs us not to dislike his characters, but to understand their circumstances, their limitations and the reasons behind their actions. Instead, he always brings out the humanity of his characters. We sympathize with them even when, on the surface, their actions may not be good.

It is this quality of Irrfan Khan, the actor—the best we have—that makes him stand apart from his peers. A quality that we should cherish and celebrate.

When Vipin Sharma had first visited Irrfan's hospital room in London, the actor and his wife were not there. The receptionist informed him that Irrfan and Sutapa had stepped out to get coffee. 'On the bed I saw a book by Rumi lying open, upside down. I will never forget that image. I wish I had taken a photograph of that. I felt very good. The Rumi book was upside down and I realized, this is Irrfan.'

It is the 'Rumi' state of mind that has taken Irrfan through the toughest and the most uncertain period of his life, and perhaps these words, from the thirteenth century Persian poet's poem, 'Life and Death', are of special significance:

why talk about all
the known and the unknown
see how the unknown merges into the known
why think separately
of this life and the next
when one is born from the last

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93 'I was tasting life for the first time, the magical side of it', rediff.com, 19 June 2018, https://www.rediff.com/movies/report/i-was-tasting-life-for-the-first-time-the-magical-side-of-it/20180619.htm

94 Anshul Chaturvedi, 'Irrfan Khan on Battling Cancer: I Trust, I've Surrendered, Irrespective of the Outcome', *The Times of India*, 19 June 2018, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/irrfan-on-battling-cancer-i-trust-ive-surrendered-irrespective-of-the-outcome/articleshow/64635045.cms

95 'Amid Cancer Treatment, Irrfan Khan Finds a New Perspective', *Business Standard*, 2 August 2018, https://www.apnews.com/d3d274993b5645e0b5c3dc7df9a9d988

96 Ankur Pathak, 'The Resurrection of Irrfan Khan', *Huffington Post*, 1 May 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/the-resurrection-of-irrfan-khan_in_5cc94721e4b0913d078a8f53

97 'Irrfan Khan Returns to Mumbai After a "Successful Surgery", Will Be Home for a Few Days', *Hindustan Times*, 14 September 2019, https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/irrfan-khan-hides-his-face-as-he-returns-to-mumbai-see-pics/story-lsgQIYSDCYGub33zMLdgAK.html

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the summer of 2018 I approached Irrfan Khan, while he was in London getting treatment for neuroendocrine tumour. We had one telephone chat with the promise of reconnecting when he was doing better. There were a few WhatsApp messages exchanged but alas, the full interview never happened. I had interviewed Irrfan in the past, but I wanted to talk to him in depth about his life and his work. I tried, but it didn't work out. Eventually I decided to respect his privacy.

I was disappointed, but many people were more than happy to speak to me about Irrfan, their friend, the actor and the star.

This book would not have been possible without the interviews I conducted with the following people sometime before I had set out to write this book: Nikkhil Advani, Avinash Arun, Ram Gopal Bajaj, Manoj Bajpai, Vasan Bala, Ritesh Batra, Tanmay Bhat, Mahesh Bhatt, Pooja Bhatt, Aditya Bhattacharya, Saket Chaudhury, Tigmanshu Dhulia, Mostofa Sarwar Farooki, Varun Gautam, Meghna Gulzar, Barry John, Asif Kapadia, Shailja Kejriwal, Jai Khanna, Amit Kumar, Ashvin Kumar, Zeenat Lakhani, Ang Lee, the late Antony Minghella, Suketu Mehta, Sudhir Mishra, Mira Nair, Govind Nihalani, Konkona Sen Sharma, Naseeruddin Shah, Ratna Pathak Shah, Bharat Sharma, Vipin Sharma, Anup Singh, Shoojit Sircar, Tillotama Shome, Sooni Taraporevala, Suparn Varma and Mita Vashisht.

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In the fall of 2016 I made a life-changing decision—to spend more time in India to care for my ailing mother. I had lived for the last three and half decades in the US. A large portion of the book was researched, written and edited in 2018 and through 2019, when I was living in Noida. I must thank my uncle and aunt Inder and Usha Popli, and cousins Rakesh and Sonal Popli for being there as a big support. Also special thanks to my niece and nephew, Diya and Avi Popli, for their company, sharing my love of food, chocolates and brownies. And thanks to my cousins Radhika and Rajiv Duggal for often asking me how the book was coming along.

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A special thanks to Ashok Vish for the dust jacket photo and his friendship.

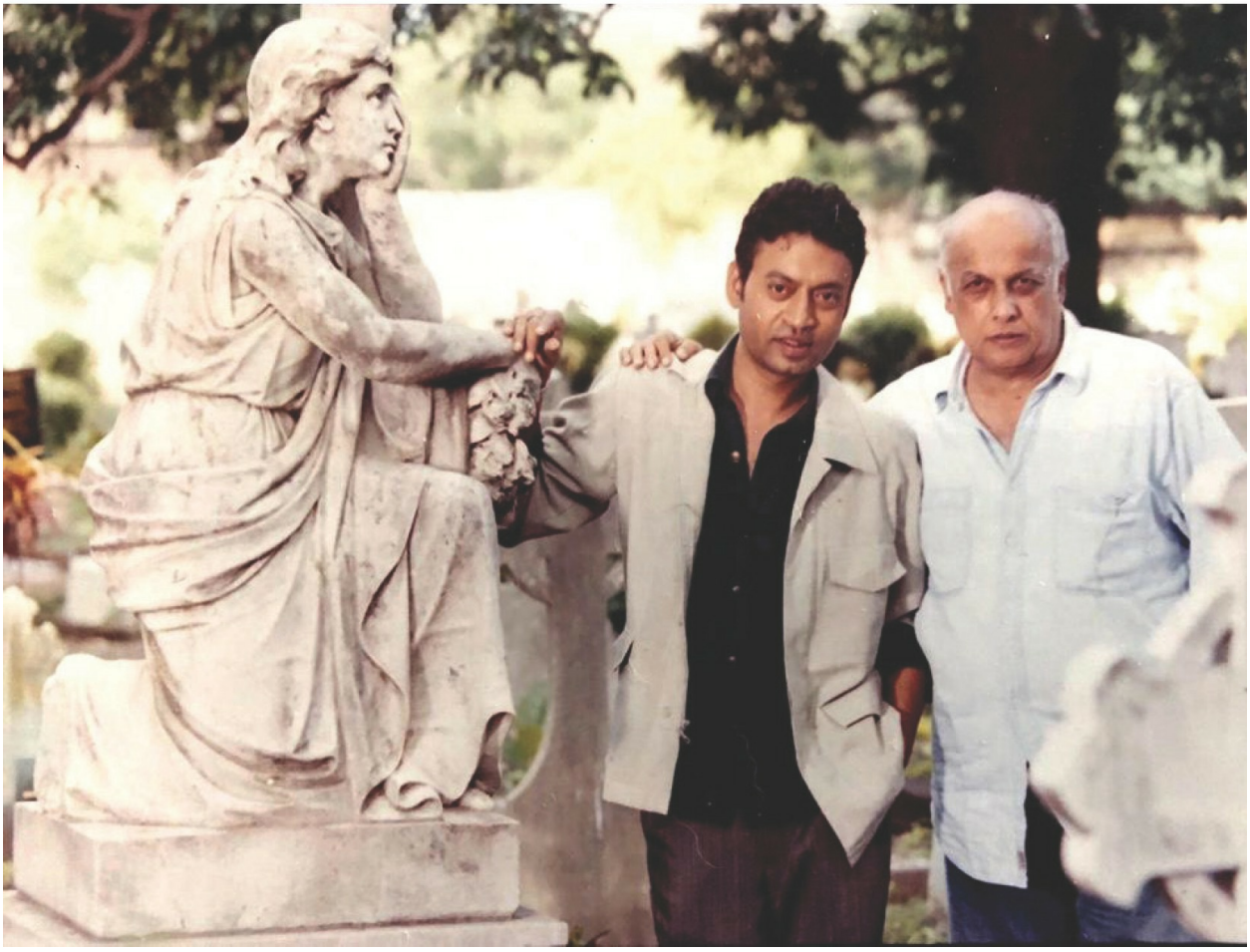
And thank you Irrfan Khan for entertaining the fan in me, giving me joy and tears, and keeping me enthralled with many amazing characters you have played on the screen. I am honoured to have spent nearly two years of my life watching your films, reading, thinking and writing about you.

Irrfan (left) as Andrei Mitritch Kleshtch in *Talghar*, the National School of Drama production of Maxim Gorky's classic play, *Lower Depths*. The 1986 performance was directed by Ram Gopal Bajaj. *Courtesy: Ram Gopal Bajaj*

Irrfan (right) during a workshop for Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (1988). Irrfan participated in the workshop for two months, but eventually he was not given an important role in the film.
Courtesy: Sooni Taraporevala

In director Aditya Bhattacharya's *Dubai Return*, Irrfan Khan plays the role of Aftab Angrez, who is sent on a job to finish off a rival gang leader. Once the job is done, Aftab is sent off to Dubai to hide.
Courtesy: Sourobh Kanti Dutta

Irrfan Khan, the dreamer, in Aditya Bhattacharya's *Dubai Return*, a comedy set in the Bombay underworld where small time crooks seek attention and notoriety with the hope of climbing the social ladder within their universe.
Courtesy: Sourobh Kanti Dutta



In the early years of his career, Irrfan Khan developed a close friendship with writer, director and producer Mahesh Bhatt. This picture was taken during the shoot of *Rog* (2005). Mahesh Bhatt wrote the script of the film and his daughter Pooja Bhatt produced it.
Courtesy: Pooja Bhatt

Irrfan playing Ashoke Ganguli on the set of Mira Nair's *The Namesake* (2006).
Courtesy: Sooni Taraporevala

Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli (Irrfan and Tabu) when they depart for New York after their marriage in Kolkata in Mira Nair's *The Namesake* (2006).
Courtesy: Sooni Taraporevala

In director Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox*, Irrfan plays Saajan Fernandes, a lonely widower. But as Ritesh points out, 'It was not a story of an old man. It was a story of someone who felt he was old.'
Courtesy: Guneet Monga

One day, director Ritesh Batra arrived on *The Lunchbox*'s set and noticed that the film's production designer had placed a radio in Saajan Fernandes's living room. Ritesh made a sudden change to his script. 'Why don't you just sit and listen to the radio?' Ritesh asked Irrfan.
Courtesy: Guneet Monga

In *The Lunchbox*, a heartbreakingly romantic film, Saajan Fernandes (Irrfan), a middle-aged office clerk in Bombay, accidentally receives a lunchbox that is meant for another person.
Courtesy: Guneet Monga

A scene from Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox* when Saajan Fernandes (Irrfan) attends the wedding of his new colleague, Shaikh (Nawazuddin Siddiqui).
Courtesy: Guneet Monga

The Lunchbox captures the sadness of being single and lonely in big cities and Irrfan brings this urban malaise to life with his heartbreaking performance.
Courtesy: Guneet Monga

Irrfan Khan as Wali Khan, a RAW agent sent to Pakistan to capture a Dawood Ibrahim-like character in Nikkhil Advani's *D-Day* (2013).
Courtesy: Vivek Rangachari

Huma Qureshi (Zoya), Irrfan Khan (Wali Khan) and Arjun Rampal (Rudra Pratap), playing three RAW agents as they plot to kidnap Goldman (Rishi Kapoor), a Dawood Ibrahim-like character in Nikkhil Advani's *D-Day* (2013).
Courtesy: Vivek Rangachari

As a RAW agent in Nikkhil Advani's *D-Day* (2013), Irrfan's Wali Khan has established a base in Pakistan.
Courtesy: Vivek Rangachari

Irrfan’s Wali Khan in an action sequence in Nikkhil Advani’s *D-Day* (2013).
Courtesy: Vivek Rangachari

A light moment in between the shoot of Meghna Gulzar's tense film, *Talvar*, where Irrfan Khan shares a joke with the supporting actor Prakash Belawadi (left).
Courtesy: Junglee Pictures

A scene from Meghna Gulzar's *Talvar*, with Konkona Sen Sharma (Nutan Tandon), mother of a teenage girl whose murder rattled all of India, and Irrfan Khan (Ashwin Kumar).
Courtesy: Junglee Pictures

In the opening sequence of Meghna Gulzar's *Talvar*, Ashwin Kumar (Irrfan Khan) is introduced to us as he is busy focusing on a video game on his cell phone.
Courtesy: Junglee Pictures

Meghna Gulzar directing Irrfan Khan during the shoot of *Talvar*.
Courtesy: Junglee Pictures

In director Anup Singh's *Qissa*: *The Tale of a Lonely Ghost*, Irrfan plays Umber Singh, a man haunted by his past.
Courtesy: Heimatfilm

In *Qissa*: *The Tale of a Lonely Ghost*, Umber Singh's (Irrfan Khan) desire to have a son pushes him to make some unreasonable decisions. Tisca Chopra, who plays Umber's wife, Mehar, is seated at the back, on the right.
Courtesy: Heimatfilm

In director Anup Singh's *The Song of Scorpions*, Irrfan Khan played a dark role, of a man, Aadam, so obsessed with a woman that he has his friend rape her, so that he himself can come across as a caring person.
Courtesy: Feather Light Films

In *The Song of Scorpions*, Nooran (Golshifteh Farahani) marries Aadam (Irrfan Khan) after she is raped by his friend Muna (Shashank Arora).
Courtesy: Feather Light Films

While promoting *The Song of Scorpions*, Irrfan Khan said, ‘I chose not to read the scenes before I went on the set. I wanted to see what comes then and there.’
Courtesy: Feather Light Films

In the Bangladeshi film, *No Bed of Roses,* Irrfan Khan plays Javed Hasan, a middle-aged filmmaker who leaves his wife for a younger woman.
Courtesy: Mostofa Sarwar Farooki

Irrfan Khan as Javed Hasan in the Bangladeshi film *No Bed of Roses*.
Courtesy: Mostofa Sarwar Farooki